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Dressing the Country Musician:
Exploring Stage Identity through Costume

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Dressing the Country Musician:
Exploring Stage Identity through Costume

by

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Dedication

To all of the artists, designers, musicians, and performers who have fought and continue to fight for the inclusivity of country music. To Dolly for fueling the fires of generations of those fighters and for those on the front line, bringing fashion and music to new eyes and ears every day.

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Abstract

Dressing the Country Musician:
Exploring Stage Identity through Costume

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Despite its humble beginnings, country music has traditionally been an exceptionally difficult community for queer and black artists to gain access to. Although this battle for acceptance has spanned decades, a new front has opened: fashion. Queer and black artists are using stage-wear embedded with strong associations to country western music and cowboy lifestyle to make waves and break into a music business that has been heavily gated to them. This internet instigated fashion focused movement has developed over the past few years into a full-on agenda… the Yeehaw Agenda.

The country western silhouette is arguably one of the most recognizable, distinctly American styles. Large brimmed hats, bright colors, embroidery, fringe, and rhinestones create and complete the quintessential image of the singing cowboy. The sparkle and flamboyant presence of such an image has become synonymous with country music, its musicians, and the iconic pop culture image of cowboys and has become inseparable from the stage, be it a rodeo or a concert.

As the canonical semiotics associated with western wear and the cowboy silhouette becomes weaponized against its self-proclaimed owners, it begs the question of where these signs came from in the beginning. Understanding what they mean and who truly "owns" them will bring light to the power that these signs have when crafted into these artist's stage identities.

This thesis is a phenomenological study that explores the connection between a country musician's stage identity and their stage costume. I will be analyzing how the symbols behind country musician's costumes have collected and changed over time and how current queer musicians are using those symbols to build a place and an identity for themselves in the larger community of country music.

Taking this investigation about the connection between stage identity and costume, I worked one on one with Dan Hardick, the lead singer of the Austin-based country music band FingerPistol, and designed and created a "Nudie" style embroidered and rhinestoned show stopping western suit for him to perform in.

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Rhinestones and Glory: An Introduction

It's October 13th, 2019. Despite the low rumbling thunder and impending rain, excited patrons line up outside of Austin's historic outdoor music venue Scoot Inn in anticipation. The line begins to snake down along East 4th Street as whispers mount into whoops and yee-haws. Ticket scalpers come out of the woodwork, flashing their wares low, like sleight of hand card tricks. Police begin to arrive to oversee the traffic.

When the doors open, the crowd files in quickly to grab spots in the front. Roy Orbison plays on the overheard speakers, a perfect choice. The crowd gathers in around the stage and even the threat of rain doesn't stop the growing excitement. The age range of the crowd spans the entire spectrum. Singles, couples, and groups of all manner of people are present. Tonight, fans sporting DIY costumes emulating their idol make their way through the quickly growing throng to the merchandise booth. The amount and quality of the costumes is astounding and is far beyond what I had expected. Homemade fringed masks twirl and twist in the wind and kitschy plastic cowboy hats with neon LED lights were so plentiful that I was half expecting them to have been sold at the venue. Vintage pearl snaps and fishnets, American flags and Pride flags, cowboy boots and Converse: I had never seen a more inclusive crowd at a country music concert.

The music on the speakers cuts out and the audience falls silent for a moment before lapsing back into its excited cacophony. When the stage doors open, you can *hear* the collective gasp as the first figure emerges.

Orville Peck and his band, in all their rhinestoned glory, come on stage. His mask tonight is black leather with two long braids on either side. He's dressed in black and white cowhide shotgun chaps, a matching cowhide tank top and a matching cowboy hat. A fringed black leather vest and giant sparkling buckle finish the ensemble. The rest of

the band sport black pants with the traditional arrow shaped belt loops and pockets and white pearl snaps, wide collared western shirts with smile pockets on the breast and embroidered yokes. He picks up his white and gold Gretsch and launches in a deep, soul crushing version of “Big Sky.”

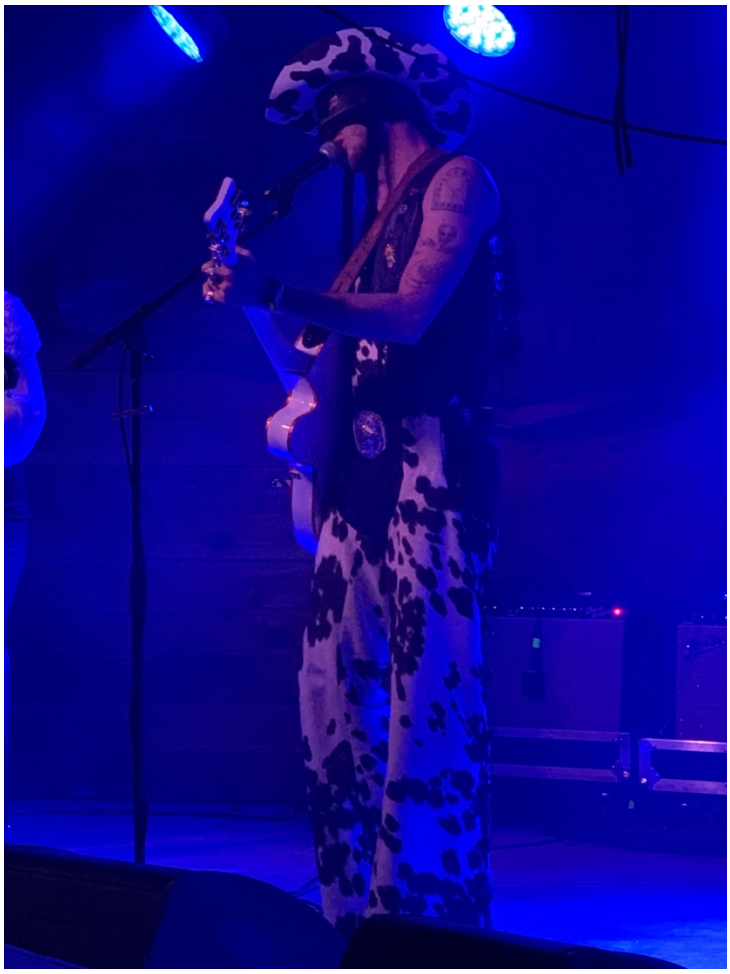

Figure 1: Orville Peck performing at Scoot Inn

It was hard to believe that less than a year before Orville Peck had been an inaudible murmur in the music industry. Now, he is the biggest perceived threat to the core traditions of country western music. Orville openly sings about gay love and loss

with the same genuine soul that straight identifying artists sing about heteronormative love. He has his own style of sound that is also not widely accepted as country western: a mix of an ethereal electronic flare and the traditional twang of a country guitar. His song writing could be compared to the country song writers of the 1950's, his greatest inspiration being Dolly Parton. His entire stage identity has been crafted around his masks and vintage Nudie wear.

Orville is a highly knowledgeable musician who isn't just copying country. He has a deep knowledge and understanding of every aspect of its history. It is no wonder that the world of country music feels that its sound and style are being compromised by an artist who stands for everything they say it isn't. Orville isn't just borrowing, he is creating. Country music is well known for its conservative roots and standing. Having a gay artist using "their" semiotics against them to tell his own queer story has upended everything.

Although the music itself is upsetting to an audience that does not accept queerness, the idea that he is wearing vintage Nudie clothing while singing it has become an even greater issue for them. In fact, Orville's fashion is so powerful that it has helped spur on a full-fledged movement: the Yee Haw Agenda. Queer artists have begun using the image and cultural importance of cowboys to fight for their acceptance and reclaim their places in history. The Agenda is a wide-reaching movement that encapsulates many aspects of hate in this country. At its core, it is about re-diversifying a culture that was never strictly heterosexual or white to begin with. The history of the west is long and complex and today's conservative, white exclusivity discounts the vast majority of it. Queer black artists like Lil Nas X and Billy Porter are bringing western wear into the foreground of fashion and using it to fight for their right to be included and accepted.

Figure 2: Orville Peck, Lil Nas X, and Billy Porter photo compilation of outfits worn to the 2020 Grammy Awards, Out.com, Getty Images

In this paper I will explore the historical context of western wear in order to uncover the associated meanings with the image of the American cowboy. By understanding where these semiotics came from and why they have the power they do, we can better understand how modern queer artists are using them to tell their own stories. Fashion is a powerful tool and is being used to build a place for these disenfranchised artists in a musical genre that has long been closed to them.

The methodology section will lay out how I went about my research for this thesis and the review of literature will set up the foundational definitions that will aid in understanding the bigger picture in regards to looking at what fashion is, what appearance is, and what country music is in relation to this paper. In the first major section, From Ranch to Stage: An Overview of the Evolution of Western Wear, we will look at the historical evolution of western wear as functional work wear. In Rhinestones and Pearl

Snaps: Designing Western Wear for the Stage, we will look at the four original designers who brought the fashion to the stage. In the section Queer Performers: Subverting Expectations with Fashion, we will address how Nashville's feelings towards queer performers developed and how artists have fought back against them. In the last section, FingerPistol: My Design Process, I will talk about my own process designing a Nudie suit for Dan Hardick.

METHODOLOGY

The research for this project took several avenues. My thesis ended up including two major, but mostly separate, inquiries. I researched the history of western wear and identified how current queer and black artists are using it to tell their own stories and I also designed and made a Nudie suit for a local musician in Austin who is neither queer nor black. Originally the idea for the thesis was to do the historical research and design a suit for Dan Hardick but current events and today's political atmosphere brought my thesis into the present in a very real way.

The Yee Haw Agenda began to develop within the first year of my study. The timing was impeccable. It was exactly what I had gone into the project to study: how western wear had changed and was continuing to evolve over time. I was able to follow the news and social media about the Yee Haw Agenda in real time and observe it unfold. As this is a current event, the research involved came from online sources and not peer reviews reports or papers.

I researched the history of western wear in two major ways. Although there has not been a great deal of research on the specific topic of western wear, there has been a great deal done on the West in general. I was able to find books, articles, and

documentaries on various aspects and conduct informative investigation into the topic. The history of the West, the people who lived there, and continue to live there, is long, complicated, and full of brutal events. The goal of this paper is to give an overview of western wear specifically, and even more specifically the history of western wear in its transition between functional work wear and fashionable stage wear. In order to present these topics, historical events will be noted that are important to the topic but they will be simplified. The horrific outcomes of these events, the racism, gentrification, and genocide that comes with this era of history is not to be forgotten or taken lightly, even if only briefly mentioned. As with any topic that covers centuries of time, there are many different perspectives to look through. Stage wear is a direct result of American culture's draw to the romanticized idea of the West. Because of this, we will focus our recounting of history by looking through the lens of the greater cultural trends of America in regard to cowboys.

Before the pandemic set in, I was able to do in person research by viewing garments in real life at various museums and institutions across the south and south west. Unfortunately, all of my plans for in-person, hands-on viewing of archival costumes had to be canceled as the pandemic escalated.

It goes without saying that looking at stage wear costumes on mannequins and in museum lighting is far, far different than seeing them on the body they were made for in the context of a live show with the emotional and physical aspects of live entertainment. While able to do so, I saw as many live, in person concerts as I could in the Austin area in order to personally observe how stage wear looks in motion. As recounted in the introduction of this paper, I was able to go to an Orville Peck concert and see the master fashionista himself.

I personally worked with Dan Hardick to design his suit. That process included many conversations both in person while we could and over Zoom when we had to. I enjoyed going to many FingerPistol concerts both in the real world and virtually to learn more about the band and to see them in action. Being able to make those observations myself allowed me to use them to build a design that would work not only for Dan as a performer but in the physical spaces that he performs in.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to have a clear understanding going forward, I would like to lay out several definitions and grounding explanations for larger topics that are too wide to address in full in this paper.

To begin, this thesis is a phenomenological study that explores the connection between a musician's stage identity and their stage appearance. According to Saldaña and Omasta's *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life*, phenomenology is a perspective of study that looks at how a group of associated people think or feel about a particular shared experience (151). This is a qualitative study that does not pose a question to be answered through experimentation but through research and observation of society (Saldaña and Omasta 143). This approach is more applicable to looking at something that has a subjective meaning and isn't measured by numerical data. The nature of the questions being asked in this thesis are based on human experience. The meanings behind a group's fashion and how those meanings interplay with an individual's appearance are subjective and grow from a collective knowledge (Kaiser 351). In this study I will be looking at how meaning has been assigned to western wear as well as how people think about it and associate with it.

The term sign in regard to semiotics is an important definition to understand for this thesis. A large portion of this study involved looking at the deeper cultural and psychological meanings behind western wear and its silhouettes. In order to avoid confusion this term should be established.

Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz explain semiotics in their book *Semiotics: A Graphic Guide*. On a foundational level, a sign is something, be it written, spoken, or a visual representation, that correlates with a mental image, shared experience, or knowledge (Cobley and Jansz 6). A sign has two parts: the signified and the signifier. The signified is the mental image, shared experience, or knowledge that is associated with the signifier, which is the particular mode of communication used to communicate the signified such as spoken word or phrase, a written word or phrase, or some other type of visual representation (Cobley and Jansz 10).

Semiotics are important to understand in regards to appearance and to the larger ideology of fashion. According to Susan B. Kaise in her book *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context,* all articles of clothing serve as signs to viewers (29). Nothing incorporated into an appearance, in this case a stage costume, is arbitrary. Audience members pick up the visual signs that a musician is wearing and interpret them. In order to interpret these visual signs, an audience and the corresponding stage costume need a context (Kaiser 30). Placing signs in differing contexts can change the meaning of the signifiers. The relationship between the wearer and the viewer, the setting, and the history of the wearer and viewer and their history with the setting all greatly impact these interpretations as well.

In order to discuss fashion, some key ideologies must be established to create a consistent dialogue. Susan B. Kaiser, author of *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*, is the Professor of Textiles and Clothing, Gender,

Sexuality, and Women's Studies at the University of California, Davis and she states that clothing is "any tangible or material object connected to the human body" (4). Clothes are physical objects that are placed on or attached to the human body in their basic form, devoid of psychological importance. When placed on a body, psychological value is given to articles of clothing and their meaning and definitions change and become more complicated. Diana Crane is the Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* and she notes that "clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity" (1). Because of this visual importance, clothing provides a plethora of psychological cues which are interpreted through specific cultural lenses. These cues can give the viewer a vast amount of information about the identity of the person based on the cues' cultural meanings (Kaiser 11).

There are many interpretations of what fashion is, what it means, and what constitutes fashion and what does not. Fashion is an active word that describes multiple dynamic processes. It works on a macro cultural level and divisions down into more centralized local groups. This thesis is analyzing fashion from multiple angles and group sizes and I will define fashion in the most applicable way to best support the arguments made in this paper.

There are two definitions of fashion that we will reference in making our definition. According to George B. Sproles, Assistant Professor in the Department of Consumer Sciences and Retailing at Purdue University, fashion is a dynamic social process that begins with the creation of a style, the style being introduced to a population, and the population's acceptance of the style (5). To Crane, fashion is how "people interpret a specific form of culture for their own purpose, one that includes strong norms

about appropriate appearances at a particular point in time… as well as an extraordinary rich variety of alternatives" (1). Both of these definitions, although very different, are applicable to how fashion will be dealt with in this paper. Sproles defines the process from a production standpoint and focuses on the physical workings of fashion. Crane looks at fashion from a more sociological perspective and includes a temporal element that gives people agency in how they build their personal appearance. For this thesis, the social dynamics of fashion are the primary focus but it is always important to keep in mind the other processes at play.

For this paper, our definition of fashion will be as follows: fashion is a sociological process in which groups of associated people adopt and assign a set of cultural meanings to an accumulated set of clothing. These meanings include who can wear this set of clothing and when and where it can be worn (Crane 1). Because fashion is a dynamic process, the set of assigned meanings change over time and the people associated with them can also change.

As the established definition of fashion applies to a group of associated people, appearance refers to an individual. According to Kaiser, appearance is the "…the total, composite image created not only by clothing, but also by the human body and any modifications to the body that are visually perceived" (5). This includes all clothing, all accessories such jewelry, hats, ties, shoes, etc., and all body modifications from choice of hair style to makeup to tattoos to cosmetic surgery. It is important to understand that in this paper, appearance has a defined meaning that is not necessarily the same as the commonly used meaning it has in daily conversation. In this case, appearance is used with the assumption that all parts of a person's appearance were cultivated into a final design. Even if subconsciously, a decision was made, even if it was a choice to not make a choice.

It is also important to draw a line between an individual and a group in regards to clothing, the difference between appearance and fashion in this case. The relationship between an individual's choices and a group's choices is important in order to understand how these two entities interact. Appearance is an intricate part of stage identity and understanding how appearance is constructed and then perceived by an audience is vital to understanding how it works in a larger, cultural context.

Country music has had an everlasting effect on western wear fashion, and it is impossible to study one without studying the other. The image of the singing rhinestoned cowboy is inseparable from the genre, even if there are few mainstream artists that still dress that way. Musical genres are generalized groupings of music usually based on some kind of common musical themes. It is important to understand within the context of this thesis what is considered a part of the country music genre and what isn't if only because the culture of country music itself thinks it is important to know what is and what isn't. Today, country music can be found the world over and each culture has altered and changed western wear to fit their own interpretations. For the purposes of this paper, we will be focusing on American country music both geographically and culturally.

In Ken Burns' and Dayton Duncan's *Country Music* documentary, they say that "country music was not invented; it emerged… Most of all, its roots sprang from the need of everyday Americans - especially those who felt left out and looked down upon - to tell their stories. Country music, the songwriter Harlan Howard said, is 'three chords and the truth" (3). In Don Cusic's book *Discovering Country Music*, he states that "country music is the story of America set in song; it is America's music because it tells the story of those who are the backbone of America, the hard-working men and women who are patriotic, God-fearing, and unpretentious, who struggle through life with neither great riches nor fame and yet carve a meaning out of life through family, friends, work, and

good times…" (1). There are a lot of similarities between these two descriptions of country music. What ties the genre together more than anything else is its history and its focus on an ideal "average" hard-working American and the hardships they face.

Country music is not simply a collection of similar sounding music; it is a historical archive that is entwined in America's history. This shared struggle is what this genre is truly known for, even more so than its familiar use of string instruments. Another important aspect of country music, or of any music genre, is how music is determined to be country music. With a genre so large, it can be difficult to understand why something is or isn't a part of it. And just like any other art that relies on an audience, it is the audience who decides what goes and what stays (Cusic 3). This is especially important for country music. It is an old genre that grew from, and continues to cater to, a very specific audience; white, low to middle-class Americans. Orville Peck notes in an interview with Marissa R. Moss for Playboy that country music has a strong, conservative image that its audience tries to protect (25). The genre has always been looked down upon and dismissed as "hillbilly music" and is strongly associated with the culture of the American South which is generalized as being hyper homophobic, racist, and sexist (Moss 27). There is a grand assumption of the type of person who listens to country music based on these vague stereotypes that is used by recording labels when picking and signing artists. It is traditionally very difficult for artists of any creed other than white males to "make it big" in country music, if for no other reason than an antiquated image of what country music "should" be and an idealized concept of who country's audience is and not what it *could* be.

From Ranch to Stage: An Overview of the Evolution of Western Wear

The image of a cowboy is familiar to most, if not all, Americans. A tall brooding figure in a large brimmed hat, blue denim jeans, work shirt, leather boots, and a big belt form a simple yet instantly recognizable image. But what is the meaning behind this collection of signs? What do a pair of pointed toe boots signify to an audience member? The cowboy has long been idolized by Hollywood and popular culture. His generalized likeness is depicted alongside that of pirates, knights in shining armor, and astronauts. In order to look at the interpretations behind western wear, we must also study the mysterious cowboy figure itself. For the power of its semiotics comes from the cowboy's qualities and traits.

Figure 3: Wesley Swan on Smokey c. 1930, photo by Juliana Sloan Miller, Red Feather Historical Society, redfeatherhistoricalsociety.org

Cosimo Lucchese, a famous boot maker, summed up the evolution of western wear perfectly when he said “we used to make them [boots] fit a stirrup. Now we make them to fit the gas pedal of a Cadillac.” Western wear began as very specialized work wear. Its distinctive silhouette developed in the field to better the safety and survival of the workers who wore it. That same silhouette is used to enthrall audiences as flashy stage costumes that are certainly not intended to see hard labor on a ranch. But those stage costumes carry the same symbolic weight as the work wear they evolved from. The Stetson hat means the same thing whether it’s on a ranch, or a in a rodeo, or on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry.

Figure 4: Unknown cowboys wearing woolies for warmth c.1910, Orville Peck wearing woolies for a GQ Style photoshoot, 2019

VAQUEROS: 1517-1900

The history of western wear cannot begin without the introduction of the horse to the west and so cannot begin without the bloodshed and terror that Hernando Cortez brought with him in 1517 when he came to Mexico looking for gold. Before the arrival of the conquistadors, horses had not been endemic to the North and South American continents since before the Ice Age (Kauffman 8). Their use would irrevocably change the physical and political landscape of the continents forever. Although herd animal domestication existed in South America with llamas and alpacas, it was nowhere near the caliber that it would become with the introduction of horses and cattle.

Figure 5: Historical illustration of a Spanish vaquero, Bullock Texas State History Museum

For over three centuries the Spanish would occupy Mexico. They would teach their slaves how to ride and tend to the growing herds on their *rancheros* that were needed to fuel the rapidly growing population and changing culture. These skilled

workers be known as *vaqueros*, translating almost directly to “cowboys”, and would successfully adapt to rigorous lifestyle (Kauffman 8). In order to do so, they adopted the Spanish accoutrements that came from their own cultural experiences from working with horses: saddles, chaps, boots, and large brimmed sombreros. Working with and around large animals is dangerous, and the remote and rugged areas that would give the large herds enough space meant that the vaqueros were on their own. The protective clothing would give them an edge against the odds. Even though the American cowboy would not appear for another one hundred years, these articles of clothing would become the backbone of their image as well.

Figure 6: Vaquero at work, c. 1830's, painted by Hansen Dam, public domain

Although these articles of clothing would continue to evolve in appearance over the next few centuries, their base functions would be set by the vaqueros riding in the

Mexican deserts and plains. These landscapes also form much of the south and south west of North America where the iconic cowboy would appear later on in the nineteenth century. Here though, in the Mexican badlands, boots, chaps, and other protective gear would be tested against the heat of the sun and the sweat of the vaqueros first.

Horses can easily be said to be as ornery as their riders and most of the vaqueros' equipment centered around controlling, riding, and being protected from their mounts. *Chaparreras,* the Spanish word for leg armor, was derived from *chaparral* which are rough, thorny, low bushes that led the Spanish to use leather leg coverings while riding (Kauffman 90). While these coverings protected the wearer from the wear and tear of the natural landscape, they also helped protect from the horses themselves. Horses will not hesitate to try and rub against whatever they can find in an attempt to knock their riders off, hence the use of chaparreras, or chaps.

Most, if not all, cultures that used horses had some variation of the concept. American cowboy chaps would later be influenced by various forms of Native American leg coverings. For the Spanish, the first iteration of chaps was simply having the rider tie hides their saddles (Kauffman 90). They functioned as a large tarp or apron that was tied to the horn of the saddle and went around the front of the horse and over the rider's legs. This design would shift to having the rider wearing the protection directly on his legs as the original concept was cumbersome and interfered with the vaqueros' great need for flexibility and mobility. Chaps wouldn't see many more changes until after the Civil War and the cowboy's spread across America when they would begin to encounter new environments and weather (Kauffman 90).

One of the most useful and specialized parts of a vaqueros' arsenal are his boots. Originally made of horsehide or moleskin, there was nothing ornamental about them (Kuaffman 14). The sole was designed to provide maximum grip and balance. The heel

of the boot was high, thick, and square. It acted both as a stopper to avoid the vaquero's foot sliding all the way through the stirrup as well as adding grip to better stay in (Kauffman 14). The tall heel also allowed the vaquero to dig his heels into the ground when wrangling a difficult animal without losing his balance. The toe of the boot was very narrow and pointed so the vaquero could easily find the saddle's stirrup and be able to both quickly get into it as well as quickly get out of it. Stirrups are loops with flat bases on each side of the saddle that help to mount the animal, stay on it, and control it. Their design would work hand in hand with boots and so different types of boots would require different styles of stirrups.

Figure 7: Example of Spanish style stirrup that encased the front of the boot, oil painting of a vaquero by Frederic Remington, c. 1890

The top of the boot was wide and loose to allow the wearer to kick it off if their boot became trapped or wedged between animals. At this time, boots were all knee-high with straps to help pull them on (Kauffman 14). The height of the boot protected the ankles and legs of the wearer from snakes, thorny plants, rocks, and maybe more importantly, from rubbing and bruising against the saddle for the long, long hours of riding.

Figure 8: An example of the individuality of the sombrero, c. 1890's, unknown photographer, Bullock Texas State History Museum

Although the vaqueros' hats were not quite the quintessential cowboy hats that have become synonymous with the culture and image of America the world over, they were not far off. The Mexican sombrero hats that would come into existence in the deserts of Mexico were large brimmed and tall crowned. The brim kept the sun off the

face, neck, and shoulders and out of the eyes while the tall crown kept the head cool with its air flow (Kauffman 100). The brim was good at protecting the wearer from other elements as well such as rain and high winds. This particular style of hat, interestingly enough, is quite common across the world, independently developing in most cultures that relied on horses and the desert. For instance, the Mongolians would also have a similar hat, centuries earlier (Kauffman 100). The vaqueros' hat was more than just a hat, it was a tool. It was a pillow at night, a container to hold and drink water from for both rider and horse, it could be waved in the air to communicate with others, help wrangle cattle and to get his horse moving faster (Kauffman 101). With its wide brim, a wave from it could be seen for a long distance out on the plains. Even without the distinctive creases and crown shapes that would be introduced later, the sombrero would mold to its owner and its striking individuality would become inseparable from the image of a vaquero. The hat itself would become such a powerful signifier that it will continue to be instantly recognizable centuries later.

Figure 9: A group of vaqueros posing for a picture, unknown photographer, c. 1890's, Bullock Texas State History Museum

Many aspects of riding gear changed since few had spent so much of their time in the saddle for such specific work before the vaqueros. Saddles became larger and broader to better suit longer hours of work (Kauffman 32). Bridles, spurs, and lariats are all directly from Spain which acquired them from Assyrian riders centuries before (Kauffman 72). The word “spur” however is of European dialect and comes from the Celts in the fifth century BCE. The designs of many of these controlling devices were abusive to the animals but with the vaqueros entire livelihoods based on their horses, they found less lethal ways of controlling their valuable mounts (Kauffman 72).

Figure 10: A vaquero demonstrates the usefulness of a lariat, c. 1890's, Bullock Texas State History Museum

The rest of the vaqueros' outfit was simple and effective. Wool pantaloons that were open on the sides past the knee and laced closed were able to fit over or be tucked inside boots (Beard 11). Belts and suspenders were not used yet, and pants would be kept up by tying a sash around the waist. In most cases, it would be bright red in color. Their shirts would be thin cotton and loose fitting and richer riders would have elaborate waistcoats. A poncho or serape would complete the ensemble as they were especially good at protecting against the rain, wind, and sun (Beard 11).

By 1800, Spanish ranching techniques and technologies would migrate north, up through the south and south west of what would become America (Kauffman 8). Their horses and cattle would as well, and wild herds would spread across the continent throughout the centuries. In 1822, Mexico would successfully win its independence and be freed of Spanish rule. Not even fifteen years later, Texas would fight and win its own independence from Mexico. Spanish and Mexican influence created the foundation for what would become the American cowboy not only in fashion but in language and culture as well. "Buckaroo" is the English mispronunciation of vaquero with the Spanish "B" (Kauffman 10). Many of the names of the tools of the trade are also mispronunciations: a lariat was a *la reata,* a ranch was a *ranchero,* a hackamore was a *jáquina*.

Vaqueros were self sufficient, they were strong both physically and mentally, and they were not afraid of hard work. Ranching and animal rearing is one of the most difficult jobs. It is physically and mentally demanding and extremely dangerous. It requires an iron will, great patience, and fortitude. These character traits are all strongly associated with Mexico's vaqueros and they would be passed to the American cowboy along with his horse and his hat. The vaqueros gave the cowboy one more thing: his penchant for attention grabbing flare. By the late 1890's, vaqueros' work wear would

inspire their own fashionable outfits. Sombreros would be heavily decorated, waistcoats with matching pants would begin to use intricate cording designs that would later show up in the rodeo tailor Nathan Turk's designs. Celebrations of riding prowess were beginning to develop into full rodeos and fancy, custom riding gear right along with it.

NATIVE AMERICANS: 1800-1865

As I discussed briefly in the previous section, cultures exposed to equestrian elements usually undergo huge cultural changes. Many indigenous cultures of South America were destroyed by Cortez and his mounted army. The entire cultural map of Mexico shifted with the introduction of the vaqueros. These statements are gross simplifications of what happened and the far-reaching effects and harm of the Spanish influences forcibly leveraged on an entire continent. To add, the United States began acquiring land around the turn of the nineteenth century. The Louisiana Purchase spurred on Lewis and Clark's journey across the West. Their trek began to open up the unknown terrain past the Mississippi and paved the way for the over 300,000 glory seekers that would flood into California in 1848 ("California Gold Rush"). Texas would join the Union in 1845. Americans wasted no time in moving into the uncharted territories.

As the Spanish influence spread north, the Great Plains once again hosted herds of wild horses. The impact this had on the Native American tribes was considerable. Massive cultural shifts resulted as transportation, resources, and relationships amongst tribes changed. Before the scores of white immigrants from the east made their way across the new Union, the Native Americans had been integrating horses into their cultures for over a hundred years. Their clothing began to reflect their work with the large animals and many aspects would be appropriated by the mountain men, homesteaders,

runaways, and gold diggers who they would encounter in the oncoming age of white expansion. Garment construction methods, decorative resources, and functional design concepts would be adapted and adopted by the tribes from each other as well, blurring the line of who-created-what-first (Koch 5). The ease of contact between the tribes and countless newcomers and gentrifiers would create a melting pot of fashion (George-Warren and Freedman 13). Their influence would accentuate the Spanish and Mexican designs that western wear was formed from.

Figure 11: Mountain man Seth Kinman, c. 1860's, the fringed buckskin outfit is an accepted set of signs associated with early explorers of the West, this one features embroidery along the bottom edge, public domain

Even before the expansion of the Union, trappers and hunters had been slowly sifting into the west. France had become the world's purveyor of fashion and the exotic furs of the West were all the rage. The romantic notions and tall tales of the West and the high adventure it offered were sown by the early frontiersman who sent letters home

describing the majestic and frightful sights they encountered (George-Warren and Freedman 13). Even in the first decade of the 1800's, fringed buckskin hunting shirts and matching breeches were a common sight. It didn't take long for French and American explorers to realize their wool garments didn't stand a chance in the rugged terrain. Loose, light shirts and wool cloaks would be replaced by the buckskin garments inspired by what the Native Americans were wearing. Buckskin was versatile, hardy, and easily obtained (George-Warren and Freedman 13). It was almost universally accepted truth that buckskin was the best leather for everyday, utilitarian garments. Hundreds of years later, the leather is still a common sight in western wear stores for shirts, fringed jackets, vests, purses and any number of fashion items meant for a Saturday night out.

One of the everlasting hallmarks of western wear is fringe. Function wise, fringe was extremely useful in leather garments. Soft leather, and especially buckskin, becomes stiff after getting wet (George-Warren and Freedman 13). If caught in the rain, fringe would help direct water away from the body and off of the garment and allow the garment to dry faster (Bucci). Preparing leather is a time and resource consuming task and many Native American leatherworkers and garment makers would not cut off excess leather from their garments after construction. Instead, the extra material and seams would be placed on the outside of the garment and cut into fringe (Koch 107). Each tribe had its own way of decorative painting, twisting, and beading of fringe. The functionality of fringe was quickly adopted by trappers and hunters who needed the durability of leather garments but also wanted them to be more comfortable to wear.

Smoking skins was a technique to keep them soft after getting wet (Koch 105). Frontiersmen would often trade for Native American garments treated in this way, especially for their buffalo skin robes. Buffalo skin was warm and wind resistant. These garments had such great success that they were common amongst all groups living on the

Plains (Koch 109). The exact construction and decoration depended on the tribe but most were long with the fur still on the leather. Some were sewn, some were wrapped, and some had to be held to the body, usually a sign of wealth that the wearer could function with the use of only one hand. Specialized garments like these would easily transition into the cowboy's wardrobe.

Figure 12: Example of a decorated fringed buckskin shirt, c. 1890, Smithsonian collection

In a few decades, cowboys would draw knowledge from the mountain men's use of Native American leg coverings to diversify the designs of chaps. Leg coverings of some variety were also universally found among the people of the West. Mountain men

were quick to adopt their use as well; the thorny, low growing bushes and cacti made foot travel difficult. Leather leggings began as hides wrapped around the legs and evolved into a version that had a seam running down the front (Koch 137). With the introduction of horses, the seam logically moved to the side. Locating it on the front would have had it constantly rubbing on the wearer's knees. The length of leggings varied greatly, depending largely on the types of coverage required by the terrain. Chaps would also develop differing lengths for different types of work. Some versions of leggings had them attach to a belt to keep them on (Koch 137). This design trait would be adopted directly to all styles of cowboy chaps. The leggings also were skintight: the forebears of shotgun style chaps.

Figure 13: *When the Plains Were His*, painted by Charles M. Russell, c. 1906, www.charlesmarionrussell.org, example of leather leggings

Embroidery and decoration were also common and reflected the garment's origin. Tribes had different types of decorations, placements, and meanings. Unique ways of twisting and braiding fringe, beadwork, thread embroidery, painting, and staining the leather were all used (Koch 109). Western wear embroidery would heavily borrow from the Native American designs but in particular would appropriate the placement of the embroidery and other decorations. Native American designs often followed the outer seam on pants, up and down the outside of the sleeve, the full front and full back which are common placements for the embroidery on Nudie style suits.

Figure 14: Example of Choctaw embroidery and embroidery placement, c 1900's, public domain

By the late 1840's, some tribes had begun to assimilate European fashion attributes to their clothing, especially the ones that served functions that their own clothing did not. Many began adding various types of collars including standing collars as well as short cowl-like cloaks that extended over the shoulders and down the back, both of which helped protect against rain and sun (George-Warren and Freedman 19). These too would be special places for adornment, especially embroidery and quilt work. Front panel shirts with yokes would be adopted later in the century. The solid front panel of cloth or leather was better at keeping out the wind than center opening shirts, especially while riding. These would influence the use of large front and back yokes which would also become important places for embroidery placement, and unique design features in their own right.

Figure 15: Example of buckskin hunting shirt incorporating European clothing elements such as a standing collar and cowl, c. 1830, Autry Museum of the West

In a hundred years, Nathan Turk, Rodeo Ben, Nudie, and Manuel would use these designs in their own tailoring. Nothing like the embroidery in Native American garment design existed in European fashion. They might have pulled the motif designs from their own Polish and Eastern European experiences, but the placement and layout of the motifs were distinctly appropriated from Native Americans.

Romanticism of the West ran rampant; stories from those brave enough or rich enough to travel in search of gold and pelts fueled the imaginations of those at home on the East coast (George-Warren and Freedman 13). Even today, the image of a frontiersman is an easily recognizable set of signs. Alejandro G. Iñárritu's 2015 film, *The Revenant,* was a box office sensation. The film is set in 1823 and follows a trapper's journey of revenge. Netflix produced three seasons of *Frontier*, a story following a French trapper in the early 1700's. The romanticized stories of life in the West continue to entertain.

Figure 16: "Wild West" themed live shows were popular for decades, with some traveling internationally. Costumes used would often be over exaggerations of reality and would transition to the silver screen, c. 1899, public domain

Just as the vaqueros are seen for their strong independence, the (mostly if not entirely) characterized idea of the frontier explorers were championed for the same qualities. The "success" of these rugged individuals in difficult terrain and their self-determination and reliance added to the mythos of the American attitude. This association of traits with the frontier fashion would be solidified when units of scouts on both sides of the Civil War adopted the fringed buckskin and leather leggings as their uniforms (George-Warren and Freedman 18). This new character type, the scout, would forever be added to the lineup of Western players. They would go on to use the appropriated clothing of Native Americans to secure white American's place in history as genocidal conquistadors themselves.

COWBOYS: 1865-1915

It's hard to define when cowboys became cowboys with such a long history of slow evolution. Although some occupational form of cowboy had existed in the American West since the vaqueros had moved into Southern California and Texas, the myth of the Cowboy could be said to start sometime after 1845, the addition of Texas to the Union, and the end of Civil War, the end of slavery in the state. As mentioned in the methodology, because the end goal of this thesis is to understand western wear as used in costumes for performance on stage, we will consider cowboys to have started after the Civil War. In popular culture, cowboys feature more heavily in post Civil War stories than they did before thanks to Wild West themed traveling stage shows such as Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok (George-Warren and Freedman 18). As talked about in the previous section, the West had been a fascination to the public throughout the nineteenth century and showmen and entrepreneurs had been finding ways to make

money off the people hungry for anything Western. Even as the West lost its mystery, these men continued to wring every last drop of money out of its stories of glory that they could.

Post Civil War, America found a rapidly gentrifying West. The time of frontiersman and explorers was over. The fur trade ended as France's fashion moved on ("North American Fur Trade"). Travel routes had become more established although they were still fraught with danger. The mining towns that had sprung up across the country to meet the needs of gold diggers and trappers either withered away or became economically diverse enough to survive. A new business became the most profitable: cattle ranching (Kauffman 10). By the 1870's, the meat industry would be changed forever as the industrial revolution on the East coast accelerated. Beef and other animal products could be packaged and delivered to millions and railroads allowed easy transportation of stock, opening up the possibilities of cattle ranching in even more remote areas. Railroads still had a long way to go before they would unify the coasts and it still took monumental efforts to move livestock from ranch to stockyard. But the daunting task promised great reward.

All of these advancements on the tail end of the Union winning the Civil War would cause massive shifts in populations in the West. Freed slaves would move west and despite cowboys being depicted as all white men, in actuality one in four was black (Nodjimbadem). They had learned the trade on Texas ranches while their owners had gone to fight for the Confederacy. Being a cowboy and working the land was one of the few jobs that the recently freed black men could hold that allowed them the true freedom of choice (Katz 146). They would be joined by ex soldiers from both sides of the war, men looking for cheap land and work. With the rise in desire for meat products and the almost unlimited need for cowhands, the men, regardless of color, would find

opportunities on the giant cattle drives that would ultimately solidify cowboys as cultural icons.

Figure 17: A group of black cowboys, c. 1913, public domain

With changing demographics, more sedentary lifestyle options, and new sources of income, unfortunate classism began to develop. With more reliable trade routes and the introduction of mail order catalogs, those who settled in Western towns and cities were able to acquire the fashions of the East coast, and thus France and Britain, and once given the option to do so, quickly left their fringed buckskins and wool capes and buffalo robes behind (George-Warren and Freedman 22). Status was dependent on fashion more than ever. People wanted to be "civilized" and wasted no time in categorizing those dressed in anything other than the most recent trends to be below them. It almost goes without saying that this view of frontier fashion only added to the racism whites held for Native Americans.

The textiles favored by cowboys may have adapted to the changing times and opinions but most of their garments remained as stalwartly functional as they had been

for the last hundred plus years. If anything, a greater variety of types arose that would suit the needs of cowhands across the wide, ecologically diverse landscape of the United States. Mass production of clothing and leather goods aimed specifically at cowboys became commonplace by the 1870's (George-Warren and Freedman 31). Saddles, chaps, boots, and anything else the discerning cowpoke would need could be ordered through the mail. Companies familiar to us today were founded: Levi Strauss & Co., Stetson, Pendleton Woolen Mills, Lee, Ely Cattleman, Carhart, and H Bar C are only a few. The variety of types of shirts, pants, vests, and jackets exploded.

Figure 18: Post Civil War migrating family, c. 1866, public domain

When the ability to replace ruined garments became easier, buckskin was replaced with wools and cottons (George-Warren and Freedman 31). The functionality of fringe was replaced by the natural waterproof qualities of wool or even manufactured raincoats and slickers by the late 1870's (Beard 18). Fringe would become pure

decoration by the late 1880's. For the rest of western wear's history, it would come and go like any other trend.

The individuality of the sombrero was not lost when it was appropriated by the cowboy. Although Stetson would begin to sell different styles of hats with a variety of crown creases and brim shapes, for the fifty years that cowboys drove their cattle across the range, hats would be purchased as "blanks." It was up to the wearer to design the look of their own hat (Kauffman 102). Hats made of felted wool were both durable and malleable and they would acquire a distinct personality of their own depending on how their owner used them. It was said that individuals could be recognized over long distances by the shapes of their hats, just as the vaqueros were by their sombreros (Beard 23). A cowboy's hat was an extension of himself and could identify what region and what kind of work he did. The Texas ten-gallon hat isn't just a cartoony over exaggeration. The farther south one traveled, the large the brims and taller the crown became (Kauffman 102). Larger brims kept the intense sun off, and the taller crowns kept the head cooler, just as the sombreros did. Northern hats had shorter crowns to keep the head warmer and were often flat across the top instead of creased. It was probably unlikely that the men ever mistook their hat for someone else's. This individuality would carry over to stage wear as well. Musicians and their bands would use their hats as identifiers for playing to large, rowdy audiences in smokey barns and dance halls. It was a rare sight to see Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb without their hats and even modern musicians like Alan Jackson and George Strait are inseparable from their Stetsons.

Although Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis would patent the forerunner of jeans in 1871, their work pants would not gain much popularity until the 1900's and not become the iconic and dependable fashion staple that they are today until Rodeo Ben's improvements in 1947 (Sawyer). Thick woolen pants with doubled fabric layers in the

seat and knees would be the most preferred by the working man for decades (Beard 16). Some versions even had thin leather patches to increase the longevity of the garments. These types of work pants were tried and true and few felt the need to change. Cowboys preferred tight fitting pants that sat high on their waists. Spending as much time as they did in the saddle, having pants sliding down was uncomfortable (Sawyer). Suspenders were used to keep them up if needed and most pants had small cinching bands on the back waistband to tighten to fit (George-Warren and Freedman 37). Belt loops would not be added to pants until 1922 by Levi Strauss, exquisitely tooled leather belts and rodeo champion belt buckles would not appear until after the turn of the century (George-Warren and Freedman 37). In 1873, Levi would add small copper rivets to the corners of pockets and the fly to battle the stress of heavy use. These simple additions would change work pants forever. Their durability became legendary and would be copied by every other company when the patent ran out in 1909 (George-Warren Freedman 37).

Figure 19: Modern recreation of 1880's work pants. Note the lack of belt loops and cinching belt, historicalemporium.com

As mail order became popular in the 1870's, a great diversity arose in shirt design. Button ups, lace ups, bib fronts, pullovers, collarless and collared shirts could be found adorning the westerner (George-Warren and Freedman 33). All kinds of colors could be found with stripe or checked patterns. But no matter what type of closures or collars they had, all of their shirt tails were extra-long in order to tuck into their pants while riding and all were long sleeved to protect their arms from the sun (George-Warren and Freedman 38). Many had high cuffs as well to better roll the sleeve up the arm. At the turn of the century the simplification and streamlining of menswear in world fashion would begin and the design of western work shirts would become much more limited. They would all become front opening, be it with traditional buttons or snaps, and all would have collars. It wouldn't be until the 1930's that fringe and lace up styles would come back into play in stage wear when Roy Rogers and Dale Evans would seek out Nathan Turk to custom make them.

No cowboy would leave home without a vest. Pants pockets were hindered by riding, running, wrangling, and other tasks. Vests were another layer of protection, offered many pockets, and left the arms to be free and unobstructed by overwear (Beard 16). They kept the torse warm and were another layer against the wind but were not too hot. Pockets would keep notebooks, timepieces, cigarettes, and pocketknives close at hand without being in the way. Cowboys would more often than not have a work vest and a going out vest that was finely tailored out of nicer fabrics, usually silk (George-Warren and Freedman 33). Waistcoat designs would be the last bastion of extravagance in menswear for decades.

Figure 20: A group of resting cowhands, all in their vests and hats, c. 1904, public domain

Unlike its depictions in popular culture, the use of dusters was actually quite limited. Although the long coats would appear later on, it was rarely for function (George-Warren and Freedman 33). Most cowpokes would prefer canvas jackets and continue to favor Native American blanket style coats and wraps (Beard 18). These shorter garments allowed for easier mounting and dismounting than the long duster coats. They could also serve many functions and were often used for anything but outerwear, just like everything else cowboys wore. There is no room for storage on a horse; anything and everything needed to be as effective and as efficient as possible.

Chaps diversified with wider landscape. Shotgun chaps were tight to the legs and either laced together, were fastened with a zipper, or simply sewn shut and slid on over the pants (Kauffman 90). These were great at keeping out the wind and snow in colder

regions and were not far removed from the designs of Native American leather leggings. In the hotter parts, chaps would be open at the bottom and flare out. Called bat wings, they were also easy to get out of if the cowboy found himself pinned (Kauffman 90). For the coldest and most rugged terrain, cowboys would wear woolies: furry chaps made of angora goatskin, sheepskin, buffaloskin, and bearskin (Kauffman 94). Chinks, or chinkaderos, are a style of short chaps that end right below the knee and are made of a softer leather. They allow cowboys maximum movement while working on foot and on their knees but still offer protection and padding.

Figure 21: Example of woolies, worn to keep out the wind and cold, c. 1880's, public domain

As cowboys became richer and manufacturing became more prevalent, so did the production of flashier, more ornate garments. Boots, chaps, gloves, holsters, and saddles became canvases for leatherworkers. Spurs and guns would also become embellished and

highly decorative. Cowboys may not have been on a stage but they were no strangers to style. Their distinctive looks easily captured the imaginations of the same folk who had been amazed by the frontiersman. They became the new symbol for freedom and individualism (George-Warren and Freedman 33). Their image would be set, and the cowboy's appearance would indefinitely be a sign of self-reliance, individuality, strength, and independence.

The golden age of cowboys was remarkably short, lasting only fifty odd years. It ended around the turn of the century as railroads were finished and transportation of livestock no longer required the strenuous labor it had only a few years before (Nodjimbadem). But stories of the West and their exploits and adventures would live on in American popular culture. "Wild West" themed traveling shows and P.T. Barnum would dazzle crowds with historically inaccurate reenactments until the 1920's and successfully transition their acts into the up and coming silent film medium (George-Warren and Freedman 18). Many of the original silver screen cowboys got their start working for Buffalo Bill and his show (George-Warren and Freedman 34). It was here when western wear would finally see the separation between work wear and stage wear. As movies became more and more popular, so too did their stars and their fashion.

Music was much slower to adopt the well-tailored, flashy western cut suits. As country music developed in the first quarter of the twentieth century, three very distinct markets emerged: Nashville, Texas, and southern California. Their fashions and their music both developed their own flavor. Nashville was home to "hillbilly" music and performers worn clothing that made them look like they had just come in off the farm (George-Warren and Freedman 106). There was nothing coordinated about their appearances and in fact it was heavily frowned upon to wear anything with a distinctive western cut or style. Texas would create its own western swing style of music and

although their outfits were not brightly colored and rhinestoned, they were well tailored and put together (George-Warren and Freedman 109). California got on the Nathan Turk wagon as soon as it could, probably due to its proximity to Hollywood's buckaroo heroes. It would take another fifty years before rhinestones would become the norm in Nashville.

By the 1930's, country music was reaching a national audience but Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry were very reluctant to change. Zeke Clements was the first performer to wear a tailored western outfit on the Opry's stage in 1930 (George-Warren 106). It wouldn't be until Pee Wee King's Golden West Cowboys in 1937 that a full band would wear coordinating, well made, thought out costumes. It was met with the same disapproval, even seven years later. It would all change in 1947 when Tex Williams would ask a struggling Nudie Cohn to make a set of outfits for him and his band in California. Backed by his first wild success, Nudie would turn his persuasive salesmanship towards Music Row.

Figure 22: One of Lefty Frizzell's rhinestoned shirts, c. 1950, designed by Nudie Cohn, a part of Marty Stuart's collection on display at Graceland

Rhinestones and Pearl Snaps: Designing Western Wear for the Stage

With the rise of the cowboy on the silver screen, western wear began to take on new looks. It was no longer about functionality and keeping the cowboy alive, it was about keeping him the center of attention. As acting cowboys transitioned from live traveling shows to film, they needed clothes to dazzle a new kind of audience: fans. The constant need for new and increasingly more extravagant outfits to continue to impress an audience that would watch every movie and every episode gave rise to a new niche in fashion design. When country musicians adopted the same, over-the-top looks for their own performances in the early 1940's, the spectacular western wear made for the screen worked wonders on the stage as well. Four men rose to the top in western fashion: Rodeo Ben, Nathan Turk, Nudie Cohn, and later, Manuel.

NATHAN TURK: 1895-1978

Although many people had designed western wear over the first five hundred plus years of its existence in North and South America, Nathan Turk may have single handedly changed its appearance more than any other. The list of influences on western wear was about to have yet another added to it: the Old Country of Eastern Europe. Surprisingly little is known about Nathan Turk. There are next to no photos of Nathan or his famous shop despite being open for fifty years (Beard 32). Turk and his pioneering counterpart on the East coast, Rodeo Ben, would set trends in western wear that persist today.

Nathan Turk was born in 1895 in Poland. Turk would apprentice as a tailor when he was ten years old in Warsaw before he immigrated to the United States (George-

Warren and Freedman 58). Turk would move his family out west to Los Angeles in 1920 due to his poor health. Doctors recommended the dry heat as opposed to the cold of the east coast. He would open his business in Van Nuys, not far from the ranches where Hollywood's westerns were being filmed (George-Warren and Freedman 59). Just as Rodeo Ben would stumble into western tailoring, Nathan Turk had no other intention other than to use his tailoring skills to support his family. Being so close to the ranches, his main clientele initially began as cowhands and riders looking for riding wear. Turk had no knowledge of such garments and went to the library to find pictures (George-Warren and Freedman 59). It didn't take long for the stars themselves to find their way to his shop. By the 1930's, Turk would be making clothing for regulars Roy Rogers, Dale Evens, and Gene Autry. It wouldn't be any more time before the California musicians followed. Spade Cooley, Jimmy Wakely, Stuart Hamlin, Tex Ritter, and the Sons of the Pioneers adopted the new, loud western styles before any musician in Nashville dared to wear such fashion (George-Warren and Freedman 108). It was said in the late 1940's that there wasn't a single western star, be it in music, movies, or rodeo, who didn't have a Turk designed garment.

Unlike the other designers we will talk about, Turk was quiet and reserved (Beard 23). There was nothing flashy in his own style and he was not a natural salesman. While Rodeo Ben would capitalize on his own fame and put out mail-order catalogues and go to rodeos around the country to entice new clients, Turk relied on loyal customers and word of mouth. His direct, reserved, and no-nonsense manner let his customers know they were getting a square deal. Quality was his highest priority and he would be the master tailor in his shop for the entirety of his career (Beard 23).

As mentioned, Turk did not have any previous experience with western or riding wear. For his designs he borrowed heavily from the Eastern Europe folk dance costumes

of his youth (George-Warren and Freedman 59). Although there are no sources that say specifically so, I believe that the bright, jewel tone colors that would become standard in western wear originated from Turk. Such designs did not exist before he began to create his garments. The colors that he used are not colors often associated with the west before the movie stars and celebrities adopted the looks. They are colors, however, that feature heavily in European folkdance costumes. One of his favorite books was Andre Varagnac's *National Costumes of Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia* (George-Freedman 59). The book is a collection of stunning lithograph prints who's brilliant colors match those in Turk's designs perfectly. Turk also liked to use patterned fabrics paired with solids, a choice that would become another hallmark of his shirts. Turk had a good eye for fabric and was known for using heavy satins and wool gabardine.

Perhaps the most recognizable trait of all western wear, Turk's work featured beautiful embroidery details. Once again, his inspiration was drawn from folk wear which can also be distinctly observed in the pages of *National Costumes*. European floral arrangements with non-native flowers almost exclusively decorated his work and layouts and locations of the motifs followed those found on these traditional garments: around pockets, down the front edges of shirts and vests, down the front of pants and around the sleeves. His work for the Maddox Brothers and Rose was legendary. The band was known as being the most colorful hillbilly band and they proudly worn Turk's designs for decades.

Figure 23: Nathan Turk designed matching outfits for the Maddox Brothers and Rose featuring his typical bright colors and European folk art inspired embroidery, c. 1949, Marty Stuart's collection on display at Graceland

Turk was the originator of the embroidered arrows and smile pockets, as well as reintroducing the use of piping (George-Warren and Freedman 59). Small arrow tacks were often used to support ends of pockets and darts in nonwestern cut fashions but were usually small, discreet, and of a matching thread color. Turk made them attention grabbing and very prominent by making them bigger and using contrasting colors. Corded piping had been a common feature in vaquero designs although it had previously not featured in North American designs. Turk loved to add piping in candy stripes or

contrasting colors to decorate yokes, plackets, and cuffs to bring attention to their unique shapes. He would experiment with different combinations and pocket placements until he was happy with a design (George-Warren and Freedman 60).

Figure 24: Jim Reeves suit designed by Nathan Turk, on display at Heart of Texas Country Music Museum

Turk also added his own additions to the general functionality of western shirts. Although darts are often hidden or made as understated as possible in traditional tailoring, Turk didn't shy away from their use. His shirts often had one or even two large darts on the front on each side to better shape the fabric to the torso. He would even accentuate them by putting embroidered arrows as their ends. Throwing all convention

out the window, he opted for a horizontal dart across the lower back. These all would make tucking the shirt in much easier and keep it from rolling over the belt and blousing out (George-Warren and Freedman 60). With belts and buckles becoming eye catching accessories in the late 1940's, keeping the shirt from blocking them was important. Tight fitting garments were also preferred by cowboys riding horseback, whether they were working the ranch or acting in a movie.

In his fifty years of business, Turk would dress every star. He may have lacked the showmanship that the other designers had but he made up for it with his high standards of quality. Even today, garments with Turk's label are worth a fortune. When his shop closed in 1977, he tried to sell it to Nudie or Manuel. Neither would buy it, saying that the business was priceless (Beard 23).

Figure 25: Johnny Cash's before he was the Man in Black, featuring Turk's distinctive arrowed darts and fine top stitching details, c. 1957, designed by Nathan Turk, part of Marty Stuart's collection on display at Graceland

RODEO BEN: 1893-1983

Nathan Turk might have been quiet and reserved but his East coast counterpart, Bernard Lichtenstein, was a natural businessman. Known as "Rodeo Ben," he would become a sought after designer of western wear by rodeo champions, movie stars, and musicians. Lichtenstein was also born in Poland around the turn of the nineteenth century (George-Warren and Freedman 65). Just like Turk, he was a tailor's apprentice as a child and immigrated to America to escape the mounting danger in Eastern Europe. With his tailoring skills and understanding of fabric, Lichtenstein found early success in the garment industry in Philadelphia (Sawyer).

Figure 26: Rodeo Ben, premier rodeo tailor, c. 1950's

In 1928 Lichtenstein would dive headfirst into the world of western wear by accident. While working as a woolen-goods salesman, he was asked for a strange order: fabric in bright fuchsia, aquamarine, purple, and pink (George-Warren and Freedman 65). Curious, he delivered the materials himself to the rodeo and was instantly fascinated by

what he saw. The performers were excited to find that he was a tailor as well as a textile seller and he left with their measurements. But Lichtenstein wasn't just any tailor. He had an eye for improvement and created flashy show outfits that were also functional for the performers. He made tighter fitting suits with room under the arms to move more freely, hemmed the pants straight with no cuff for ease of wear with boots, and cut them with a much lower rise than was the current trend and much tighter in the seat for comfort while riding (George-Warren and Freedman 66). In this single, by-chance encounter, Lichtenstein would revolutionize rodeo fashion. Word of his talents spread quickly and the legacy of Rodeo Ben was born.

Rodeo Ben would go on to be a premier western wear designer. Although he would design for actors and musicians, he continued to keep his close relationship with rodeo riders. For him, making garments flashy as well as functional would always be a priority. Two of his biggest contributions would be the introduction of pearl snaps and the Wrangler blue jeans that would finally put jeans on the map and solidify their permanent place in fashion across all genres.

Today, the image of a cowboy is almost impossible to separate from a pair of Wrangler blue jeans. Although Levi Strauss had begun his work on creating a good pair of denim work pants, it wouldn't be until Rodeo Ben's redesign that they would catch on. In 1947 the Blue Bell clothing company reached out to Rodeo Ben and inquired about creating a new pair of jeans specifically for rodeo riders (Sawyer). With his familiarity with the physical requirements of rodeo work, he designed a new pair of jeans meant for withstanding fast and hard movement but which would still be comfortable. They were a higher rise than previous jeans so they held up around the waist and didn't slide down while riding or bending over. The back pockets were placed higher up so the wearer could actually use the pockets without sitting on their contents (Sawyer). Levi had added

belt loops and taken the back cincher off of their pants in 1922 but since then large championship belt buckles and wide, hand tooled leather belts had become the norm (George-Warren and Freedman 37). Rodeo Ben's jeans would feature longer belt loops to support the wider belts and heavy buckles. Rodeo cowboys Jim Shoulders, Bill Linderman, and Freckles Brown would be the first to wear the new "13MZW" style (Sawyer). In no time at all, every rider would be wearing these jeans and The Blue Bell company would become known as Wrangler and cater exclusively to western wear.

Figure 27: Vintage advertisement for Blue Bell's Wrangler jeans, c. 1952

Today, jeans span the entire fashion spectrum and are commonly worn by people of all backgrounds and economic classes regardless of their association with western wear. In fact, unlike all other clothing associated with cowboys, jeans lose their association when put in any other context. Hats, boots, pearl snap shirts, buckles, and western style belts will continue to be signs for western wear even when worn on their own or even combined with fashions of different genres. A ten-gallon cowboy hat can be paired with any outfit and still be a signifier for “cowboy.” In order for jeans to continue to be signifiers for western wear and cowboys when on their own, they usually need to be actual Wrangler brand jeans with the recognizable “W” stitching on the back pockets.

Figure 28: Blue variation of Elvis' "penguin" suit. While not a traditionally cut western suit, it still signifies western wear with its bright two-tone colors and Native American beadwork belt, c. 1976 designed by Bill Belew, on display at Graceland

In a way, Rodeo Ben may have sown the seed to his own niche's demise. In the 1980's, the "urban cowboy" fashion would completely replace the flash and flamboyance of Ben's, Turk's, Nudie's, and Manuel's wild fashions, signaling the end to a grand era of rhinestones and fringe. Willie Nelson is famous for his laid back, Wrangler jeans look in the early 1980's but it was George Strait who would personally end the rhinestone era (Sawyer). Strait's Wrangler jeans, simple, understated pearl-snap shirts, large yet simple buckles, and broken in cowboy boots set the new trend. Other musicians quickly followed and adopted the simpler, more "hometown" look. Country music's roots in simple, relatable stories and lyrics would be once more reflected in the almost "right off the ranch" fashion that its stars were now wearing. As cowboy fashion had split between the ranch and stage around the 1890's, it would merge back into one single fashion once again in the 1980's.

The other major contribution Rodeo Ben would make was the addition of pearl snaps (Beard 36). While watching the buckaroos be thrown from their bulls, Rodeo Ben and his son began to think about the rider's safety. Thinking about glove snaps, they decided to see if they could put them on the fronts of shirts instead of buttons. It was an instant success. If the wearer was caught on anything, like the horn of a bull, it was much easier to escape by quickly pulling at the snaps instead of trying to undo traditional buttons (Beard 36). Over time, the simple snaps grew fancier and fancier, with the mother-of-pearl inlays becoming the most popular (George-Warren and Freedman 67).

Embroidery was a key design feature on Rodeo Ben's work. While Turk stuck fairly close to his floral motifs inspired by the folk dress of Eastern European cultures, Rodeo Ben pulled from the motifs and images of the "Wild West" that had been established in American popular culture over the last one hundred years and were based around stories of the west. I would categorize these motifs into three main categories:

cowboy technology, animals and plants, and cultural motifs, most of which were appropriated from Native American and Mexican art. Wagon wheels, barbed wire, horseshoes, branding irons and brands, lariats and ropes, boots, and hats are only a few commonly seen “technology” motifs used in western wear embroidery (George-Warren and Freedman 71). Animals spanned everything from domesticated familiars such as horses, cattle (most commonly a Texas long-horn), and dogs to wild animals like bears, birds like eagles and pheasants, and regional creatures like crocodiles and frogs. Appropriated images and motifs from Native Americans and Mexican art included woven blanket and pottery designs and full portraits of chiefs and warriors. These images would be even more heavily associated with western wear after the post WWII boom in nostalgic romanticism of the west (George-Warren and Freedman 146).

Figure 29: Example of Rodeo Ben's work, c. 1950's, private collector

Figure 30: Example of Rodeo Ben's work, c. 1950's, private collector

Rodeo Ben would design for a very diverse clientele. As his son, Rodeo Ben Jr., notes, designing for real cowboys was different than the movie stars (George-Warren and Freedman 70). They liked their suits to be more elegant with arrow pockets, big western yokes but without the fringe and glamour. Movie stars, and musicians, would of course go with the fancy pearl snaps, lacing, fringe, and embroidery. Despite the great variety, Ben's design style would still be a through-line through all of his work. No matter how adorned Roy Rogers' or Gene Autry's shirts got, there was still a delicate, well intentioned purposefulness. Turk and Rodeo Ben freely exchanged influences between their own work and both men's designs have a sensible and classic grace to them. Many, many of their choices in color, embroidery style, and accoutrements continue to be mainstays in current western wear trends.

NUDIE COHN: 1902-1983

Figure 31: Nudie Cohn and Gram Parsons in his "Palace of Sin" suit, possibly the most famous Nudie design, c. 1969, photo by Raeanne Rubenstein

Of all of the early designers, it would be Nudie who gained enough fame for the iconic rhinestoned western cut suit to be named after him. His style was wild and chaotic with arguably none of the grace and finesse that Turk and Rodeo Ben had brought into their art. But by the 1950's Nashville had finally caught on to the fashion and the more extravagant the outfits the better. Nudie's story is truly no different than theirs either. Nuta Kotlyarenko was born in Kiev, Russia in 1902. He too would begin as a tailoring apprentice as a young boy (Nudie and Cabrall 10).

What separates him from the others is his ambition and great sense of adventure. After an unsuccessful attempt to escape to America with his older brother Julius, they tried again after recuperating and finally made it to New York (Nudie and Cabrall 10). On the first attempt, the brothers were caught. Julius was sent to Moscow to be inducted

into the military and Nudie spent weeks wandering on his own trying to get back home. Both made it back and despite the danger, tried again. On Ellis Island, his name would be changed from Nuta to Nudie. He would spend the rest of his teens and young adulthood chasing dream after dream. Nudie was drawn to the fame and lights of Broadway but couldn't make it as a performer. He tried boxing and it brought him to Hollywood where he would work odd jobs on film sets. He dreamed of being one of the cowboys in the movies but it was not to be. Unable to stay in any place for too long, he would bounce between New York and LA and everywhere in between. Nudie wanted more from life. His imagination was caught up in the glam and lights of Hollywood and he couldn't give up his need to find his place in it:

> I still hadn't shaken my desire to be somehow involved in show business… It wouldn't be enough, I thought, to simply have entertainers as my customers. There's no glory for the guy who shortens the pants of a big star. Who cares about the cleaner who gets the lipstick stains off a sex symbol's shirt?... I kept dreaming until I could see myself as a famous costume designer. My creations would be worn by great stars the world over and they'd really stand out so that my clothes would be as famous as the people in them. (George-Warren and Freedman 88)

In 1922 he attempted his first go at opening his own tailoring shop. He fell in love with a young actress and promptly sold the shop to move back to New York but once there they broke it off (Nudie and Cabrall 14). In 1934 he would open his shop, Nudie's for the Ladies, that specialized in burlesque and stripper costumes. A few years later, he and his wife, Helen "Bobbie" Barbara Cohn, would leave the business and move back to her hometown of Mankato, Minnesota, and open yet another tailoring shop.

Nudie had enjoyed making wild and unique costumes for the chorus girls but still dreamed about his silver screen Hollywood cowboys that had been an influence on him since his first days in America. He had fallen in love with the West and in 1940 he moved his family out to LA once again.

This time they were there to stay. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be until 1950 when he would be able to make his rhinestone cowboy dreams come true. Ten years of bad luck in LA had left him with almost nothing but he was still as determined as ever (Nudie and Cabrall 17). He fixed his garage into a studio and turned to a different kind of cowboy: the singing variety. He had begun to spend his weekends going out to the California honky tonks and dance clubs and had decided that instead of acting cowboys, maybe his fortune could follow the musical kind. Tex Williams had just left Spade Cooley's band and was looking to make a name for himself. He and Nudie struck a deal; if he auctioned off one of his horses and bought Nudie a sewing machine, Nudie would make him and his new band matching outfits. They had a show coming up at the Riverside Rancho nightclub and it could put them both on the map (Nudie and Carball 18).

Nothing Nudie did was ever without trouble and it turned out taking the band's measurements while celebrating the successful auction would have its repercussions. The first round of suits were horribly misfit and Nudie and Bobbie would work day and night to get a new set made in time for the show. Over 2,500 people went to see Tex Williams, however, and all their work and trouble paid off in the form of $850 (Nudie and Carball 18). Nudie would quickly become a premier western wear designer along side Turk and Rodeo Ben.

Although Turk would make drape cut suits for Earnest Tubb, Nudie claims to have been the first tailor to introduce the styling to western suits (George-Warren and

Freedman 94). Drape style suits are only light padded, allowing them to be more flexible and to naturally accentuate the body. They often have larger, wider lapels and more fabric in the shoulders, chest, and armscye in order to put heavier emphasis on the chest and shoulders. The waist is slightly narrowed and placed high on the body to thin out the lower torso and make the chest and shoulders look even broader ("Drape suit"). With country musicians being the models of masculinity that they were, the suits looked great and helped emphasize it. He also claims that he created the first western styled tuxedo for Roy Rogers (George-Warren and Freedman 94). The gold lamé suit he would make for Elvis in 1957 is also essentially a golden tuxedo. The style of formal western wear is still around and commonly seen at weddings and around music award season.

Figure 32: Elvis' gold lamé suit, designed by Nudie, c. 1956, on display at Graceland

Nudie may have occasionally made things for rodeo riders, but his focus was not on function as Turk and Rodeo Ben's was. The tighter suits made riding and the showmanship of rodeo work easier, something that he stepped away from with his drape style suits. Nudie's customers were singing cowboys that stood on stage or movie stars that walked on the red carpet or millionaire oil barons who did nothing at all. He was able to take his levels of extravagance and flamboyance to all new heights without the limitations of function. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans said that Nudie was far more adventurous than Turk ever was and loved to collaborate on new designs with the stars themselves (George-Warren and Freedman 94).

Figure 33: For Hank Snow, complete with his iconic western tie. Snow preferred cut off jackets to show off the embroidery on the pants and elaborate belt loops and pockets. Snow was originally from Canada and Nudie often used images of the Northwest in his designs for Snow, designed by Nudie Cohn, c. 1957, part of Marty Stuart's collection on display at Graceland

"The King of the Rhinestone Cowboy," Nudie will forever be associated with rhinestones (Mackenzie 93). However, it should be noted that Nathan Turk, yes the reserved tailor who stayed away from the razzle dazzle, was probably the first to use rhinestones. There exists a sea foam green suit that dates to 1944 and is stoned top to bottom (Mackenzie 94). Its existence was probably completely unknown to Nudie and he would bring rhinestones in full force and ultimately become their "king." Looking back on his time in the lady's garment shop he ran in New York he said:

> I really liked the rhinestones and it was an idea I got in the back of my mind then to someday design a cowboy suit with rhinestones. I had been thinking about designing Western clothes for quite some time and I knew as soon as I began working with rhinestones that I had hit on a million dollar idea. (Mackenzie 94)

Nudie also didn't stop with country musicians. After making a suit for Elvis in 1957, he opened the doors to any musician. Western wear was no longer just for cowboys. Or maybe, now anyone could be a cowboy and all they needed was a bedazzled Nudie suit to prove it. In 1969 Gram Parsons's Nudie suit, the one on the album cover for *The Gilded Palace of Sin,* would become his most infamous creation (Mackenzie 34). White gabardine with pills, naked girls, and marijuana leaves embroidered on it, it shook the LA and Las Vegas music scene. With the introduction of rock and roll in the late 1950's and its quickly growing and changing style, Nudie would leave his mark on the genre forever (Mackenzie 35).

MANUEL: 1934 - PRESENT

Manuel Cuevas is the youngest of the premier western wear tailors and is still alive today and is still running a very successful tailoring business in Nashville, Tennessee. Even today, he loves what he does and what he has created. Over the course of the pandemic, he has made personalized, embroidered masks with the same intuitive style and precision that he makes his other garments with. Manuel isn't afraid to change with the times, something that ultimately defeated Nudie, Turk, and Rodeo Ben. He says of his continuing career:

> This is my castle, this is my world. I live for it more than anything else. I go out dancing so that they know I'm still kicking because you gotta keep reminding them you are around. And when they say to me, "You are a legend," I say, "I am Manuel and I am still here." (Mackenzie 113)

Figure 34: Manuel Cuevas, photo by Alex Crawford, wheretraveler.com

He was born in 1934 in Coalcomán, Mexico (George-Warren and Freedman 174). Even as a young child he had a flare for the dramatic. His older brother taught him to sew and he would become the best dressed twelve year old in town, dressing himself in wild, bright colors and patterns (Mackenzie 110). He attended university in Guadalajara for psychology but never stopped sewing. He moved to Los Angels in the mid 1950's to begin his tailoring career. After a few odd jobs he began working for Sy Devore, tailor to the Rat Pack and other crisp Hollywood elites (Mackenzie 110). Manuel was bored by the unimaginative garments he was making for stars he had no reference for. Growing up in Mexico, his heart never went to the white crooners. He had fallen in love with the American westerns that he would walk miles to see, *The Lone Ranger* being one of his favorites (Mackenzie 110). He loved the fashions in those movies and when given the chance to work for Turk's embroidery master, Viola Grae, he took it without question. While she taught him how to use the Bonnaz chain stitch machines that were used to create the beautiful embroidery work on western wear, he began to impress Nudie with his high-quality work (George-Warren and Freedman 174). It wasn't long before Nudie hired him and the two became inseparable.

By the mid 1950's Manuel was exactly where he needed to be. He was an intuitive, careful designer who created garments that captured the personality and identity of his clients in a way that none of the other designers had been able to. He was able to design subtle as well as loud and flashy. Even at this early stage of his career he was a fan of black-on-black, embroidering black flower arrangements up and down the front of black jackets with matching black shirts. It would be Manuel who would put Johnny Cash in all black. It would also be Manuel who gave the Grateful Dead their flower motifs, inspired by Día de Los Muertos designs from his childhood in Mexico (George-Warren and Freedman 175). Manuel was a leading contributor to Gram Parson's Sin City

suit as well. The two became good friends and Manuel would often hang out with the band and go to their shows. The making of that suit in particular lived on in the minds of Nudie and Manuel because of the collaborative process that went into it between them and Gram Parson (Mackenzie 35). Manuel would be the one to create Elvis' gold lamé suit and it would be Manuel who would have Elvis move like he did on stage through the front of his shop and decide to put him in a jumpsuit for the first time. It would be Manuel whose work with Dwight Yoakam would revitalize western wear in the late 1990's.

Figure 35: Black suit for Johnny Cash designed by Manuel, c. 1980's

When Manuel split from Nudie in the mid 1970's, he took all of his clients with him (Beard 136). Nobody made stage clothes like Manuel and his ability to design for both function, fashion, and identity drew all of the big stars to him. While the other tailors slowly faded into history, Manuel continued to create. With his designing for Nudie and then on his own, Manuel was more often than not the mind behind the second half of the century's greatest western wear creations.

Queer Performers: Subverting Expectation with Fashion

WONDERING

Webb Pierce may or may not have been gay or queer but he certainly was used to illustrate exactly what Nashville and its blooming music business thought about anyone expressing non normative gender on their grounds. By the early 1940's, Nashville was quickly becoming the center of all country music. World War II had shifted the world of country music as aggressively as it had Hollywood and western films. With stars joining the war effort, old bands broke up, new bands formed, and radio became even more widely listened to (Cusic 52). WSM, or the Grand Ole Opry, had found enormous success in its radio and live performances and it was responsible for bringing country music to the biggest audience the genre had seen yet (Vander Wel 79). A greater divide would develop between California and Nashville Western swing band sound and culture, giving Nashville even more control and power over its unique sound. Because of the pioneering businessman and great wealth of regional talent, Tennessee, Nashville specifically, had been building the foundation for a distinctly independent music industry over the past

decade. All of the connections for signing, producing, publishing, and distributing music were already in place (Vander Wel 79).

Figure 36: Webb Pierce in one of his Nudie outfits, c. 1950's, countrymusichalloffame.org

It was soon after the end of the war that America joined another, one arguably more culturally destructive. The Cold War brought with it the distrust of neighbors and strangers alike. McCarty was quick to draw lines connecting homosexuality and communism (Vander Wel 81). Respecting, and policing, gender norms in regards to roles and appearances became the first barrier between the good, free people of American and the Reds. At this time, country music had been labeled by the greater population as "hillbilly music" much to the chagrin of the Nashville music industry. Publicists would

crusade against this low-class image. Most country radio listeners were upper middle class and with the classist attitudes of the country also becoming elevated due to rampaging McCarthyism, it would be a difficult battle (Vander Wel 75). A difficult battle indeed considering that most of the popular country western musicians were extraordinarily fallible. Publicists pushed to prove their musicians as strong, masculine men who fit the ticket of gender norms across the board and being breadwinners for their doting wives and children (Vander Wel 81).

Case in point would be Hank Williams being portrayed as a happily married working family man while his marriage to Audrey was anything but happy, let alone his unchecked alcoholism and unprofessional work ethic. Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb and their masculine bravado would become the models of masculinity in Nashville (Vander Wel 82). Both portrayed sincerity, respectability, restraint, maturity and an acceptable amount of world-weariness in their musical performances. These qualities fit hand-in-hand with the established idea of normative masculine gender norms and quickly became the standard for male country singers.

Webb Pierce had none of those attributes. He was physically emotive and sang in a much higher registrar with a much wider range. Williams, Tubb, and the rest of the masculine elite sang songs that staged them as equals to the audience and allowed them to be sympathetic and relatable. Pierce sang as if he was below the status of the audience, a true over-exaggeration of loss and desire (Vander Wel 83). This theatrical act presented him as being closer to the female gender norm instead of the male and therefore subverted expectations. He took the emotional themes of vulnerability present in country music and pushed them to the forefront. Due to his popularity and shrewd business sense, Pierce had been able to put himself in a high position in Decca's recording hierarchy. He would have more choice over which songs he sung than anyone else and used his

unchallenged autonomy to choose songs that also subverted expected gender norms (Vander Wel 78). Pierce challenged middle-class masculinity and showed that there was more than one way to embody the honky tonk blues.

Around this time, Nudie had begun making his rhinestoned cowboy suit dreams come true. Although they would eventually be fully adopted and then inseparable from country music, Nashville was much slower to accept the look than the California music scene. Pierce would be one of the first to not only take on the fashion, but take it to its extreme (Vander Wel 80). He would buy Nudie's loudest, most flamboyant works. Although there was a time men when had strutted like peacocks in their loud fashions, America, and the rest of the world for that matter, had changed the entire attitude around men's dress around the turn of the century. Attention seeking displays had not only been all but eliminated but also effeminized (Vander Wel 81). Little Jimmy Dickens would be the first star to wear a Nudie suit on the Grand Ole Opry in 1949 and he would be laughed and booed off the stage (Beard 77). It would be Lefty Frizzle's western cut shirt with his initials subtly rhinestoned on the collar that would be Nudie's big break in Nashville. Pierce would waste no time starting his personal Nudie collection. He would be well known by those in his circle as being ostentatious and extreme, wearing the wildest outfits, spending hours on his hair, and spending thousands on his equally outrageous cars. His guitar shaped pool would attract fans from all over. He would become the very picture of overly done country music and channel the exact energy that would lead country fashion to run itself into the ground by the 1980's. In a time when men were expected to not show any form of emotion or individuality, Pierce showed no sign of obedience to the social norms.

Despite not fitting into the Nashville gender normative, Webb Pierce would go on to have a full career. He would have 181 singles chart in his lifetime (Vander Wel 79).

He would, however, give publicists a run for their money. Historical chroniclers and documentarians give little mention of Pierce despite him technically having more success than Hank Williams or Ernest Tubb. Newspapers of the time would attempt to fully downplay his glamorous lifestyle (Vander Wel 94). In his early career, Pierce was portrayed as a perfectly eligible bachelor in his late middle twenties while in actuality he was recently divorced and in his early thirties (Vander Wel 95). Webb was an ambitious go-getter and had crafted his own career and yet more often than not his success was placed on the inspiration and support from his family in an attempt to offset his peacock displays by throwing in the idea of a strong nuclear family to distract from it. Placing Pierce in a domestic setting and as far from his Cadillacs, Nudie suits, and hair pomade as possible would separate him enough to allow the general public to accept him as a performer.

Although Pierce was not persecuted or denied his career over his exuberance, the social changes that he embodied landed on deaf ears. Pierce probably had no intention of changing anything and was simply stubborn and ambitious enough to get away with being his true self on stage in a time where that true self was practically illegal. His choices in clothing and song material do lead one to believe, however, that he was indeed aware of the discrimination in gender norms. Unfortunately, he didn't fight back against the tabloids and publicists for writing up cover stories for his excess and flamboyance. Although he proved that middle class masculinity displays in country music could be much more diverse than the Willams and Tubb version, his passiveness may have ultimately set up how the Nashville scene was to respond and react to future artists, both queer and non-normative. The true, subtle messages in his performances would be erased in order to make him fit the standard mold and despite his supreme success, his

importance in music history would be pushed to the wayside to make room for those who did conform.

SHOW PONY

The Yee Haw Agenda is bringing awareness of the struggle of queer and black artists in country music to the general public. The movement began as any unified internet organization begins, with memes, or jokes. In 2017 Twitter and other social media platforms fully employed the new cowboy hat smiley face emoji in a slew of memes. The two most popular being "howdy, I'm the sheriff of…" and the "what in tarnation" meme which is still popular today (Spanos). The Yee Haw Agenda didn't start as anything political. It was a slow-growing fascination with cowboy fashion, which is possibly why it has become the force that it is today.

Artist Kacey Musgraves showed us that the signs in western wear are powerful enough to retain their cultural meanings even when completely removed from country music. Those meanings, despite being so powerful, do indeed change when placed in a different context. Western wear is not necessarily tied to the conservative political associations of country music if the context in which it appears is removed from those aspects (Spanos). Western wear in a pop concert setting still holds its established symbolism of individuality and independence and "cowboyness" but can be separated from the conversative politics and implied homophobia more often than not associated with the music genre. By adding tasteful exaggeration to her genuine appreciation for country music and understanding how it is perceived by those outside of the fandom, Musgraves opened the door for other musicians to do the same. 2018 and 2019 saw Lady Gaga, Justin Timberlake, Bruce Springsteen, Miley Cyrus, Kesha, Beyoncé, and many

others add western flare to their stage appearances, bringing home the separation of fashion and politics (Spanos).

These artists showed that western wear could be pulled away from the less favorable associations it had passively acquired in Nashville over the decades from publicists trying to build a general, "safe" market for country music for a broad general audience in a post WWII America. Now, with the door open, artists began reclaiming western wear in a more serious way. Black artists began using the online western wear fever to build awareness of the history of black cowboys that has been completely erased from American history (Spanos). Social media platform TikTok embraced the movement and the #YeeHawChallenge. People would pretend to drink "yee yee juice" and through creative video effects transform themselves into a cowboy, with the most ostentatious transformations getting hundreds of thousands of likes (Strapagiel). These videos all played to Lil Nas X's song *Old Town Road* and the success of the challenge boosted the song's views and turned it into an overnight sensation. Even now, *Old Town Road* is the most streamed song, ever, across all platforms (Street). It has gone platinum fourteen times, has won two Grammy awards, two MTV VMAs, an American Music Award, a Billboard Music Award, and finally, a Country Music Association Award (Shanos). Although Lil Nas X's song has met with wild success, it is still not widely accepted as being a country song. After it charted on Billboard's country chart, it was pulled (Shanos). It was originally listed on the Hot 100, the Hot Country Songs, and the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs charts (Leight). Billboard would pull it from the country chart without announcement, only mentioning that its placement on the chart in the first place was a mistake. When asked further, Billboard said that *Old Town Road* may include references to cowboy symbols and use guitar and banjo but overall, the composition was not in line with current country genre trends (Leight). Fortunately, in today's modern age

music trends exist beyond the charts and with individuals having complete power over what they listen to, the song was a roaring success regardless. In the end, the issue only illustrated the continuation of the struggle of black musicians being accepted by systems that are inherently racist and white controlled (Leight). As a black, queer musician, Lil Nas has not only single handedly shaken the foundation of country music but brought attention to a far deeper-seated issue: the racist assumptions that form the baseline for what creates and separates music genres.

Figure 37: Lil Nas X at the 2019 MTV VMAs, photo by Roy Rochlin, Getty Images, elle.com

Another artist fighting for acceptance in country music is Orville Peck. While Lil Nas X is bringing awareness to queer black artists across genres with his use of crossing musical genre compositions, Orville Peck is more specifically looking towards making room for queer musicians in Nashville. Orville is openly gay and his lyrics, that he writes himself, reflect this. His lyrics fall in line with very traditional 40's and 50's country music when it comes to the honesty of the subject matter, even if the subject matter is coming from a "nontraditional" perspective (Moss, 26). In a decade of "bro country" that focuses on songs written about driving trucks, drinking, and loose women, Peck's call back to the heartache and loss that the original singing cowboys lamented should be seen as anything but corrosive.

Figure 38: Orville Peck, photo by Tracy Hua, 2020

His outfits are as ostentatious as the country singers who have come before him: authentic, vintage western wear, rhinestones, glitter, and the most extravagant part, his collection of personally made fringed masks. Masks are not an icon of western wear but

that could very well change with Peck's growing fame and audience. Peck borrowed the idea of his mask from another country singer and added the fringe himself. The story of Jimmy "Orion" Ellis is extraordinarily tragic. Denied, tricked, and trampled on, Ellis was not a queer musician, but he is the perfect example of how cruel and in-human the musical industry can be. It is no wonder that Orville Peck adopted his famed masked visage as well as drawing half of his pseudonym from him: Ellis was born in Orrville, Missouri (Moss, 29).

Figure 39: Jimmy "Orion" Ellis, c. 1970's, nytimes.com

Jimmy Ellis was a country singer who sounded unmistakably like Elvis and in the post-Elvis 1970's, the world was still clamoring for more. Sun Studio was more than willing to step up to the plate by recording new records and releasing them under no name and having listeners assume it was Elvis (Finlay, 22:56 - 1:26:25). In a truly unbelievable turn of events, Shelby Singleton, the then head of Sun Studio, teamed up with writer Gail Brewer-Giorgio to create "Orion." Jimmy Ellis was no longer Jimmy

Ellis on stage, he was Orion, the masked country crooner who, although never directly said aloud, was widely assumed to be Elvis returned after faking his own death (Finlay, 27:29 – 1:26:25). Ellis was contractually required to always be masked, even going so far as to have to be masked while sleeping in his own hotel room while on tour. He would go to have a successful, but very short, career playing an empty ghost on stage.

Orville Peck wears his masks for a very different reason. Using the acting technique of Jacques Lecoq, Peck feels that eliminating the distracting emotions of the face allows an audience to focus on the body and eyes of the performer, the centers of the true self (Cox 162). Peck claims that he doesn't use the mask to hide but rather to fully show the audience who he is. In this case, Peck becomes more than who is he and becomes the heartache and loss that everyone listening has ever felt. He is able to form a constructive relationship between performer and audience to address the rawest of human emotion and perhaps prove to some that a broken heart is a broken heart, no matter who broke it.

When asked, Peck is adamant that his goal is not to start a revolution (Moss, 25). He doesn't need to; country music has and has always had room for queer voices, even if it doesn't want to admit it. Nashville dealt with Webb Pierce's excessive peacocking and flirtation with non-normative gender roles and effeminate masculinity by ignoring it and sweeping it under the rug, passively creating the larger narrative that only straight white men were (and are) in country music, even if it's far from the truth. Peck himself calls out Nashville for the normalization of the erasure of gender, race, and class (Moss 29). When charting country music artists are all white, cisgender men (with the occasional woman) it shows the wider audience that anyone not in those categories need not apply. To compound things further, southern, cisgender, white men are all stereotyped to be racist, homophobic, and lower class which are all attributes that are then applied to country

music and its audience (Moss 29). The media and the general public then assume that there must not be any queer artists in a genre that is almost exclusively defined by their exclusion from it.

Lil Nas X was stated to be the first openly gay artist to be nominated for a Country Music Association Award by many, many news outlets. This is incorrect, Shane McAnally and Brandy Clark were nominated several years before (Moss 29). Patrick Haggerty is most often recognized as the first openly gay country singer ever, with his band, Lavender Country, having been founded in 1973 (Jackson). Haggerty has been an activist his entire life, more often than not standing against the ideals held by traditional country music. After Lavender Country released their song "Crying These Cocksucking Tears" they would be so ostracized that they would be unable to book performances which put Haggerty's music on hold for decades. Now, with young queer voices gaining traction and volume, he finds himself once again on stage, this time singing his songs with Orville Peck (Jackson).

Figure 40: Patrick Haggerty and Orville Peck, photo by Jim Bennett, Getty Images, 2019

There are and always have been queer voices in country, but because Nashville set the trend of simply erasing their presence from media and history, they are seldom heard. The music business' whitewashing, generalizing, and hiding of anything that did not fit their singular concept of masculinity has created a very uniform idea of what country music is. To the outside, it is well known, whether true or not, that country music is enjoyed by homophobic, lower class, and strictly white. By wearing traditional western wear, including actual Nudie suits, Peck and other queer artists are giving western symbols a new context. Unlike other current pop artists who are unknowingly contributing to this change, Orville Peck and Lil Nas X know exactly what they are doing to remove the stigma around country music. The older, traditional audience is outraged at his incorporation of "their" signs into his aesthetic and his open display of queerness. For the gay and straight ally community, his western suits mean the same and conjure the same image of a cowboy that they always have. But this time that cowboy isn't based on conservative, homophobic, and classist ideas.

FingerPistol: My Design Process

MAMA DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS

The two consistent themes of my childhood that I had vowed on more than one occasion to never have anything to do with were sewing and country music. My mother is a quilter and if I had the hours of my life back that I had spent utterly bored in a quilt shop, I'd have had the time to learn to play the guitar myself. Although I hadn't wanted anything to do with that either: the only music my parents listened to was 1990's country music. Arguably not as bad as what would come over the radio in the following decades,

you can only listen to Tim McGraw's "I Like It, I Love It" so many times. I still know all of the words to the hot country hits of the first decade of my life and I will undoubtedly be haunted by Alan Jackson and Brooks & Dunn for the rest of it.

For my 18th birthday, my parents got me a record player. It sat in my room at home while I went away to college. Two years later my grandmother gave me her "Elvis" record – his second album with RCA. She had saved her allowance for it and had bought it despite her parent's objections and had listened to it hundreds of times. The price sticker still decorates it and the front and back of the album had ripped apart at some point. She had lovingly taped them back together, with the back on sideways.

My only real exposure to Elvis prior had been an elementary school choir event that had been 50's themed. Strictly mandatory, someone had made the grave mistake to assume all children could naturally sing with their naturally angelic voices. I remember lining up around the school's hallway with the rest of my schoolmates and screaming along to "Hound Dog" playing from an old tape deck while being yelled at to "sing better" by the principal. The final performance didn't go much better. I had to wear an ill-fitting polka dot poodle skirt and shout "watermelon" because I only could only remember the words to "Check Yes or No" and maybe "Any Man of Mine" or "Gone Country" but definitely not "Hound Dog."

The overall experience had left a bad taste in my mouth and and if anyone else had given me that record, I have no doubt I would have never listened to it. But I did. *That* was what music could be I realized. It opened an entire world of music to me and Elvis was only the beginning: Patsy Cline, Hank Snow, Hank Williams Sr., Porter Wagner, Dolly Parton, and on and on. Now *that* was country music.

My inevitable turn to sewing was far less poetic. I had always loved costumes, drawing, and making things. There really isn't a start to that path as much as there was a

point that it became a full commitment. I fell into live entertainment and it offered everything that I was looking for: good friends, strange hours, travel, and creativity. I found myself most at home in the costume shop and after years of traversing across the west, theater to theater, I decided to go to graduate school.

The process was grueling. I sifted through dozens of schools that all looked the same. In the end it was between the University of Maryland and the University of Texas at Austin. I visited Maryland first. College Park could not have been designed any more specifically for me to hate it more. I had doubts as to whether going to grad school was even what I wanted to do anymore if it required me to live anywhere like that.

And then I went to Texas. Austin was everything I was looking for. Not only was it a fun, interesting place but it was steeped in the history that I was interested in: music. I chose it in a heartbeat. I was over the moon with the opportunity to move to Austin. Coming from Arizona, it sounded like an oasis. "Live music" in Phoenix is rare and finding *good* is rarer still. Of course it was the first thing I did when I got here.

Dale Watson was playing at The Continental Club. He wore a rhinestoned leather jacket and it sparkled and shined as the packed crowd danced and hollered along with the music. It caught my imagination immediately. I'd never seen rhinestones like that in real life and the energy of the crowd was electric. I couldn't get the image out of my head.

Austin cowboy culture was extraordinarily different than the cowboys I had grown up with in Arizona and Utah. These were *singing* cowboys, decked out in their two-toned pearl snaps and shimmering rhinestones. The energy was remarkable and so reminiscent of those old records. As graduate school began, Dale Watson's jacket still shined in my mind.

During my first winter break in the first part of 2019 I took advantage of the time I had to explore some of the music history of Texas. I went to Wink, Texas, the birthplace

of Roy Orbison. I went up to Lubbock to see Buddy Holly's original stomping grounds and stopped in Brady, at the Heart of Texas Country Music Museum. That museum in particular would shape my thesis more than any.

Figure 41: Stage wear on display at Heart of Texas Country Music Museum, From left to right: stage suit designed for Freddie Hart by Manuel, stage suit designed for Jim Reeves by Nathan Turk, stage suit designed for Lefty Frizzle by Nudie

Although small, its collection of country musician stage wear was incredible. They had outfits and accessories for a huge number of stars: Jim Reeves, Lefty Frizzle, Faron Young, Hank Snow, Dolly Parton, Carl Smith, Johnny Cash, Ernest Tubb, and Hank Thompson just to name a few. They also had displays for two great designers, Manuel and Nudie. Being able to see their work side by side was an incredible opportunity to compare their styles. Manuel's were instantly recognizable with his eye towards flowers and more traditional embroidery designs with symmetrical placement whereas Nudie's were loud and flashy with giant images and wild color choices.

In fact, being able to see so many star's costumes in one room was an amazing way to learn how each used the style to build their own stage identity. A close study could reveal who each suit was made for without even having to look at a name tag. Jim Reeves was singing long before Nudie hit the scene and so he sported the more subdued yet still beautiful designs of young Nathan Turk. His use of interesting geometric angles and arrows and strongly contrasting two tone suits complimented Reeve's broad shoulders perfectly. Hank Snow fully embraced Nudie's most flamboyant creations with suits embroidered head to toe with rhinestones and mirrors. Ernest Tubb's style lands in the middle with Nudie's most "subtle" designs that may have leaned away from the dazzle but still exemplified and expanded on the style lines that Nathan Turk would establish as the fundamentals of western wear years if not decades earlier.

I decided that I wanted to design my own Nudie suit for a musician. The suit needed to be created for a real, currently performing musician. These suits are so personal in their imagery and the power they hold under the stage lights is a huge part of the audience's draw to them. Seeing something like that on a mannequin is incomparable to seeing it on a stage. As much as I would like to make myself extravagant outfits just like Nudie, I needed to make it for someone else.

DAN "HONDO" HEARTACHE AND THE FINGERPISTOL HOTTIES

My search concluded before it even began when UT's costume shop manager Nanette Acosta heard about what I wanted to do. It turned out she already had a musician friend who was interested in having a Nudie style suit made. Dan Hardick is the lead man of FingerPistol, a band that has called Austin home for twenty plus years. They are a

three-time Austin Music Award winning country band and are known for their Tuesday night shows at the Little Longhorn Saloon. She put me in contact with Dan right away.

Dan was very excited at the prospect of having his own suit designed and I was excited to be designing for someone who would appreciate the amount of work that would go into it. I had no idea how the journey was going to unfold. I took a deep dive into the research aspect of this thesis in preparation for meeting with him to talk about what he wanted. Our first meeting was as open ended and awkward as any first design meeting is. He said he was open for anything and brought some images that he used on their t-shirts and marketing. Despite all of the research and images I had compiled, I was caught grossly unprepared. I had never designed something so personal for one person before. My work was rooted in live entertainment shows like film and theater in which there is rarely any time or, unfortunately, reason to design something so specifically for a single actor.

I had no idea how to even begin the process with us both being so busy in our own worlds. Designing him a Nudie suit would be challenging to say the least. In the beginning I would go to as many of their shows as I could. FingerPistol isn't just any country music band; with Dan at the helm and it having had so long to develop, it is full of quirky character. I needed that flavor to be in the suit as well but I didn't have a good enough grasp on it. I had next to no spare time with all of my other projects and school to get to know them on any kind of personal level.

It is unclear how this project would have turned out had the pandemic not happened. For most if not all other Live Design graduate students in my class, the year of upheaval was detrimental to their thesis projects. As unfortunate as it sounds, mine actually flourished. I finally had the time to get to know Dan and the band. While live music floundered with the closures and lock down, Dan stepped up to the plate without

hesitation. He researched live streaming and taught himself how to set up the band for the internet. They started to stream from an outdoor set up so they could safely play together and Nanette and I helped them set up and control the various video feeds. It was a wild DIY adventure that I was happy to be a part of. I got to know Dan and the members of the band far better than I would have just by going to their regular shows.

FingerPistol is a quirky band that is the very personification of Austin itself. Dan fondly refers to them as the "Kelly's Heroes" of country music because the members are all men over the age of fifty with the addition of the two young female vocalists. There is a sense of patriotic parody in their imagery. In their live streams, giant flags moving in the breeze, fireworks, eagles and Texas featured prominently. The culture of Texas western swing bands tends to be very serious, competitive, and conservative, none of which apply to FingerPistol. During their regular show at the Little Longhorn Saloon, they bring their classic "eagle tears" – the bar only serves beer but allows patrons to bring their own liquor. FingerPistol provides El Centenario tequila for the dancers and listeners. Their sound is that of a quintessential country western swing band with covers of classic songs as well as many that Dan and other members of the band have written themselves. Their audience enjoys them both. Dan also provides quite the selection of merchandise. Wear one of their t-shirts and get your first drink at the bar free. Tip the band and get a free drink koozie that sports their eagle and the text "Mmmm… tastes like freedom" on the back. They also have the occasional pair of tighty-whities with their logo stamped on the back. Overall the band experience is very genuine with a goofy sense of humor and a levity that is greatly appreciated by their loyal fan base.

Dan Hardick has a motorized long board that he races around town on, boasting that his top speed is twenty-five miles an hour. He loves technology and is always thinking about what useful and gimmicky set ups he could get next. He has seemingly

inexhaustible energy. A natural leader with both an artistic and an entrepreneurial spirit, he is fueled by a youthful spark that both inspires and annoys the rest of the band. He's got a sense of humor but takes his band seriously. He clearly loves what he does and dedicates himself to his art. The first one to the location and the last to leave, he refers to himself as a "van mom" and provides everything the band would need from extension cords to bug spray and sunscreen. The idea of the diva leading man who shows up and only lifts his own guitar doesn't exist here. Dan works hard to get FingerPistol running. Watching him on stage, dancing around and having the time of his life, every time, is only more proof of his love for what he does.

The rest of the band are just as dedicated to their craft and all of them play in other bands and work on their own side projects. Landis Armstrong plays a worn-out vintage Stratocaster with a Hello Kitty guitar strap and is a guitar legend in his own right. Landis and Andrew C. Gerfers, FingerPistol's drummer, also have their own band, Stone Wheels and have done work with Willie Nelson and his daughter. Stoic Sam Wilson on his aquamarine bass, always a constant presence with his inexhaustible knowledge of old Austin and music history. Meg Bodi is the main "girl singer" as Dan calls her and is also a cosmetician and plays in a jazz band in San Antonio. Mandy Prater is the alternate and has a full music career outside of FingerPistol including an active Twitch stream. Neil Flanz is a pedal steel guitar player who was inducted into the International Steel Guitar Hall of Fame in 2016. At eighty three years old, he's been around to play with some real legends, including Gram Parsons. The "Kelly's Heroes" of country music is right.

Now that I knew Dan and FingerPistol, I could really begin to design. In one of his live streams he referred to our project as a "thirsty" suit in reference to Nudie and my own last name. I have to say, it does have a certain charm to it.

MAKING A "THIRSTY" SUIT

Although I tailored the suit, the tailoring was not necessarily a part of the end goal so much as it was something that simply had to be done. With custom Nudie suits being upwards of thousands of dollars the only logical way to personally design Dan his own suit was to make it as well. The goal of this thesis was to design the suit and the motifs themselves. With the onset of the pandemic and the limitations it presented, I not only tailored the suit but personally decorated the jacket with the chain stitched motifs as well. Although learning how to use a chain stitch machine and the techniques it involves was never an aspect of this thesis, it became a very fulfilling artistic endeavor. Looking back, I'm very grateful to have had the time and opportunity to learn these skills. They have become a very important asset to me and I feel that the project would not have been as fulfilling, successful, or rewarding had I not done the stitching myself.

To begin, I drew inspiration from the images that Dan uses to promote the band. Eagles, Texas, a hand making a finger pistol shape, and the American flag are a few of the usual images used. I also wanted to have some eagle tears. The band's mockery of the overly patriotic was a key element that needed to be front and center.

Figure 42: Some Examples of FingerPistol's marketing images

The key feature of a Nudie suit is, as stated before, is individuality. The wearer's identity is vital in its design. One of the things that draws me to western wear is the juxtaposition of hyper masculinity and emotional vulnerability. During the 1950's this did not exist anywhere else (nor does it really today). America was fully enraptured with its country music by the mid-century and its male singers had become the poster men of masculinity in the country. The idea that these men would wear their flamboyant, shimmering jewel toned suits and lament over heartache and lost lovers makes an incredibly powerful image.

I wanted to somehow bring a little of that idea and metaphor into my own design. For my color palette I chose pink, purple, and blue because growing up in Arizona in the 90's all south western design included turquoise, salmon pink, and lavender purple. I felt those three colors may not be universally quintessential to western wear, but they were important to my own design and artistic aesthetic. I used the brightest hues of those colors I could find in order to call back to Nudie's flare for the flamboyant. FingerPistol's patriotic eagle was a perfect masculine image to use for the large motif for the back of the jacket. I decided the eagle would be stitched in various browns hues like a real eagle with some of its wing and tail feathers being the brighter colors. The feathers running along the arms and legs would also be those brighter, flashier colors as well. I thought this would symbolize the juxtaposition well.

Of course the eagle would be crying, it was perfect. The band's name could go across the bottom with the guitars just like Dan's logo. I put the easily recognizable outline of Texas behind everything and filled it with the American flag. For pants and sleeves, I chose feather and horseshoe motifs. Knowing the band as I did, I thought some horseshoes for good luck would work well, one for each member of the band other than Dan. I sent the designs to Dan to look at and he loved them.

Figure 43: Finished design for the back of Dan's jacket

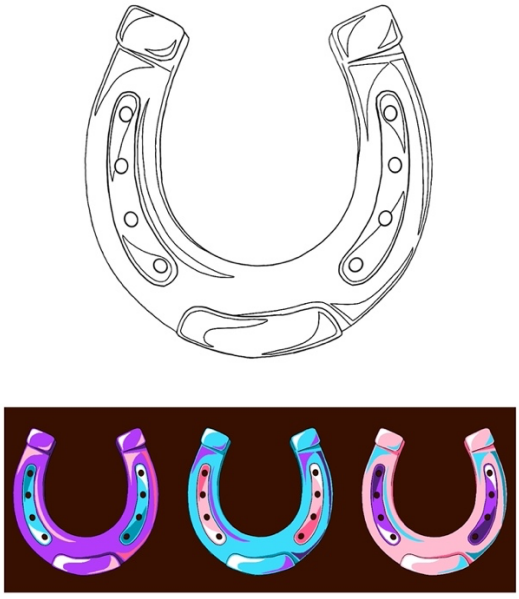

Figure 44: Motif Template for Horseshoes

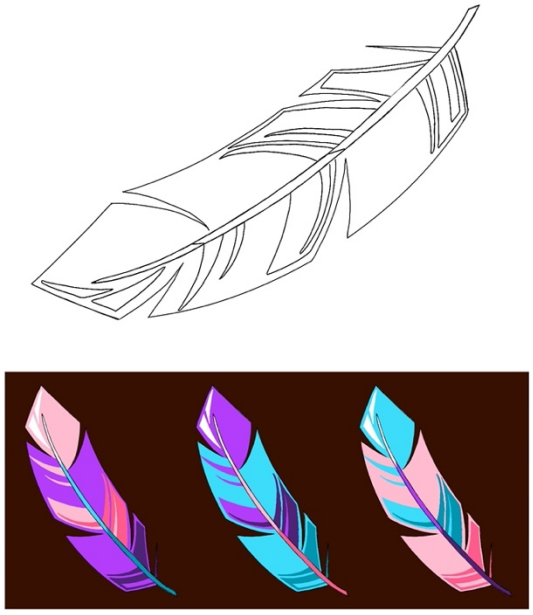

Figure 45: Motif Template for Feathers

After Dan's approval, I needed to figure out how to have the pieces chain stitched, the style of embroidery most commonly used on western wear. I was building the suit in James Glavan's tailoring class and so I had a firm timeline. I would need to find someone to do it fast. Thankfully, a friend in the Live Design program happened to have had her hair cut by a woman who had a chain stitch machine and she would be happy to put me in contact with her. I reached out to Sara Thompson about her art. She was very willing to stitch the designs for me for a very reasonable price. The class is a two semester course with the fall being the construction of the vest and pants and the spring being the construction of the jacket and so I just had her embroider the motifs on the pants and vest.

I received the pieces back and the stitching looked great. I spent the rest of the semester building the first two garments for Dan. The spring semester of 2020 started as any other. I drafted out his jacket and we struggled through two fittings together before the unimaginable happened: the pandemic.

THE MACHINE

My plan for the summer of 2020 was to find an internship in a chain stitching studio, preferably one in Nashville. With the evolution of the pandemic, the opportunity to do so became impossible. By now my interest in the embroidery aspect had grown into a desire to learn it. If I was thinking of pursuing designing western stage wear seriously, it seemed like a skill I would need to know. My knowledge of the art form and the machine would be invaluable for my future beyond graduate school. Unable to find someone to teach me the craft, I looked at my options. Well, singular option. I supposed that I could purchase my own machine and teach myself.

I started to do some research. What are chain stitch machines? How do they work? Where does one purchase one and what kinds are there? It was a brief quest; the internet has a surprising lack of information on the subject. YouTube offered very few videos and I couldn't find any books that had been written about them. When I had decided to make a Nudie suit, I had reached out to Fort Lonesome, a very prominent western wear design studio in Austin. They are known for their beautiful work and have big level celebrity clients like the LA musician and music producer Diplo. They were very accommodating and allowed me to visit their shop and see behind the scenes. I was able to see chain stitch machines in motion and see up close details on their beautiful creations. This trip would provide to be the most reliable source of information that I could gather on these machines. What had I learned? The machines were rare, expensive, and very complicated.

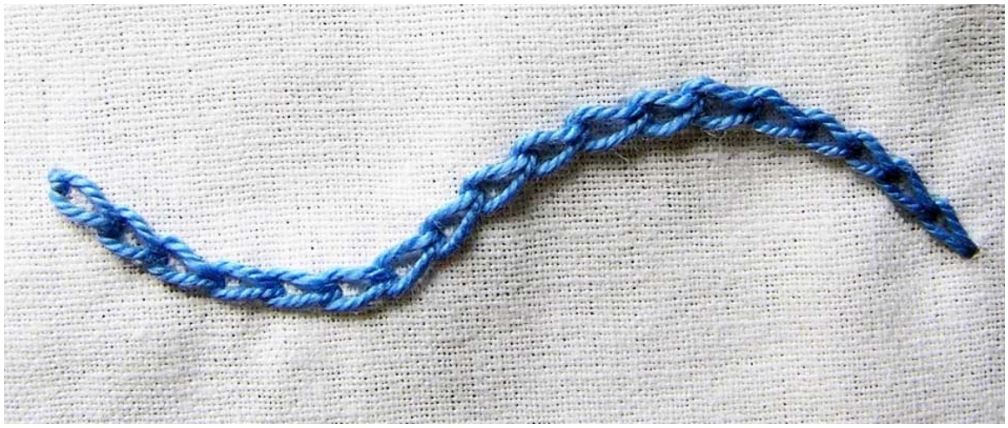

Figure 46: A basic chainstitch, trcleiden.nl

Chain stitch embroidery is one of the most ancient forms of embroidery- the simple yet elegant stitch has a unique look and has been applied to cloth for almost as long as there has been cloth to embroider. Examples of it have been traced back centuries

but its origin remains unknown. Little to no research has been done on this specific style. I've found that this stitch was used throughout time, having been seen in tombs of Egyptian pharaohs and Chinese emperors ("Chain stitch"). Its spread to Europe and incorporation into western cultures was probably through decorative fabrics imported from India. The tambour stitch as it was called is a nod to the Indian artists who were known for their work with silk and whose products were traded on the expansive Silk Road ("Chain stitch"). The easy yet graceful hand stitch became a common one used in maiden's hand work and can be seen throughout European art and fashion.

The stitch has a utilitarian function as well. The very first sewing machine invented stitched a chain stitch. Invented by Barthelemy Thimonnier in 1830, the machine was intended to be used to create uniforms for the French military (Alfred). Tailors and seamstresses rioted in the streets, fearful they would use their jobs to the new machine. It undoubtedly was not the first time humans feared their replacement by machines but it was the first time in history that an action so distinctly human could be duplicated by one.

Chain stitches, although good for some aspects of functional sewing, are not practical for basic garment construction. It is a strong stitch but if broken or untied the entire chain can be pulled loose with minimal effort. While other inventors began creating machines with strong locking stitches and perfecting them for the factory floor, Thimonnier continued to fiddle with his chain stitch machine for another twenty years (Alfred). He continued his tailoring business and renewed the patent on his machine until 1847 but it never caught on.

By 1850 sewing machines had become an enormous success and dozens had been invented for different tasks. Only a handful of years passed after Thimonnier's patent was released before companies began coming up with their own versions of his chain stitch

machine. The two giants of the age, Singer and Cornely, had models that roughly worked the same. Emily Bonnaz is the inventor behind the machine we all know and use today (Franklin 24). Unfortunately there is nothing written about her other than the fact she invented the version of the chain stitch machine that Cornely would produce and Singer would copy. Learning from Thimonnier, she streamlined the machine and adapted it to the factory floor. “Bonnaz” machines could do many different kinds of stitches aside from the classic chain stitch. Cording, braiding, and taping are all functions of applying different types of ribbon or cording to fabric by the use of a chain stitch. The machines also could make a moss or chenille stitch which is the soft fuzzy textured stitch seen on a letterman’s jacket for example. Singer’s inventors added their own flare to the machine – Troy of Troy Thread Co. added a spring system that allows you to switch between the chain stitch and chenille stitch by simply twisting a gear (Franklin 24).

The machine I would end up purchasing in 2020 is an exact copy of a Singer chain stitch machine. Since its inception in 1850 the only change to the design of the machine has been the addition of electricity which is only manifested in the inclusion of an electric motor. Despite integrating computer systems into sewing machines having been the going trend for over twenty years, the chain stitch machine remains 100% analogue. Singer also eventually ungraded the spring system that moves the face, or front, of the machine from scissor loops to coils (Franklin 24). Coil springs are modern cylindrical coil springs that are stronger and more convenient than the long-legged scissor loops that are long wires bent in a V shape with a single coil at the top that stick out of the machine and are much weaker. But that’s it. In fact, the machine doesn’t have anywhere to place your spool of thread because Emily Bonnaz’s original set up was for a factory floor in which the spools would be up on the wall behind the machines. That was well over a hundred years ago.

Chain stitch machines were very popular throughout the rest of the 1800's and the up until the first half of the 1950's. As in the centuries before, the embroidery style could be found on all matter of items from decorative motifs on beautiful silk garments to name tags on mechanic's coveralls. Unfortunately, Singer, Cornely, and all of the other companies that sprang up over the years ended production on the Bonnaz style machines in the 1950's. I was unable to find any particular reason why the market for these machines shrank other than the extreme durability and specialization of the machine. Today, the only way to get one of the "real" machines is to be lucky enough to find one to restore or buy one someone else was lucky enough to find and restore. However, there are several Chinese and Indian companies that have very recently started making either reproductions or their own versions. As one could imagine, there is a huge rift in the chain stitch community about which are better. I've found that it can become quite toxic with people going so far as to say you aren't really chain stitching if you aren't using one of the antiques and the only real machines are the old ones.

With just a quick search though ebay it became clear that the steep price tag of an original Singer or Cornely was far above what I was willing to pay for something I didn't know if I would be able to figure out. I also was unsure of buying anything vintage from an unknown seller. Without knowing anything about the machines there was no way for me to know whether I would be tricked or scammed and for something upwards of five to even eight thousand dollars I wasn't taking bets.

I ended up finding a modern version of the old design. Axis is a Chinese made copy of the Singer 114w103. It's new and a fraction of the cost of the originals. It was also on Amazon which would allow me to make the purchase knowing that I would indeed receive the machine and if there was anything wrong with it, I could return it. I

decided to make the leap. I added the machine head, the Axis brand motor, and the table to my cart and made my purchase.

Figure 47: My new Axis chain stitch machine

I also decided to set up an independent study with Professor Glavan. The study would give me time to focus on learning how the machine worked and begin to practice. As Fall 2020 would be our first full quarantined semester, it was the perfect albeit most unfortunate time to focus on learning this new skill. I cleared space in our studio room at home for my new machine and waited for it to arrive.

Through my stitching experience, I had worked with several types of industrial sewing machines. I had knowledge of how they functioned but probably more importantly understood that what I was about to get myself into would be extremely

complicated and require a lot of patience not only with the machine but with myself. I had gathered from the bits of research I could find and talking to the designers at Fort Lonesome that these machines were extremely temperamental even to experienced operators.

My first mistake was not purchasing a better motor. I had never bought an electric motor for an industrial sewing machine before and thought it safe to go with the one that was recommended for the machine. Even having a rough knowledge of how they are put together, it still took days of adjusting to get everything in the right place. At its most basic explanation, the motor has a pulley wheel and the sewing machine has a pulley wheel and a circular belt connects them together. When the motor turns the pulley, the pulley pulls the belt and thus the machine's wheel spins and makes it run. The size of the pulley on the motor determines the speed at which the machine will run. The larger the pulley, the faster the machine can go. However, it also decreases the slowest speed that the machine can run.

The motor I purchased had a 75mm pulley, which is approximately three inches. As you can imagine this is quite large for this type of machine and so it was quite fast. While it might have been perfect for a straight stitch machine or serger, for anything requiring finesse it was an unnecessary challenge. At the time I had no idea that the size of the pulley was causing this. I assumed that it was just how it was. The motor was also not a variable speed motor which meant that unlike a regular sewing machine that allows you to manage speed by changing the pressure on the pedal, it only went one speed at a time no matter how much or how little pressure you exerted. You had to type in the speed level you wanted into the control panel on the motor. It also had needle position control which meant that the machine always ended with the needle down. No amount of adjusting the controls would turn the function off.

I spent weeks trying to get the stitching down. Even at its slowest speed I didn't have sufficient control and with the needle positioning I had to calculate far in advance on how far to go knowing that I would end up getting an extra stitch wherever I stopped. I was frustrated. I had yet to successfully stitch in a straight line, was unable to fill solid shapes, and couldn't understand how anyone could use that machine for any kind of detail work.

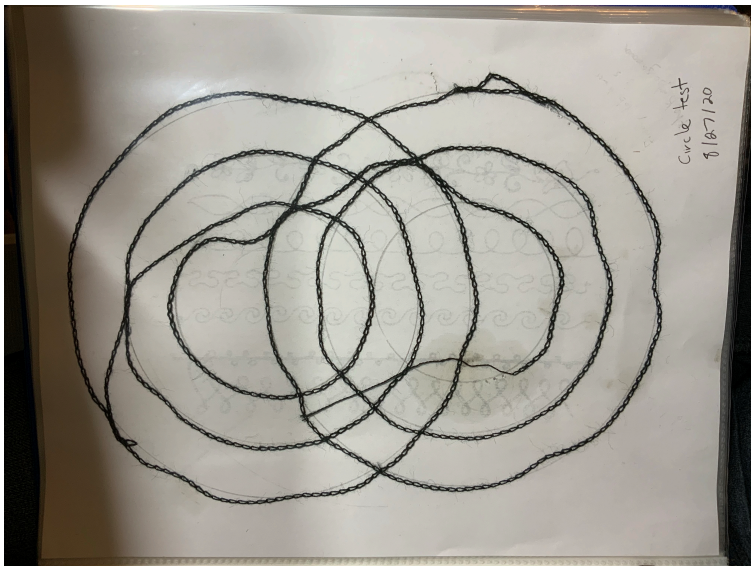

Figure 48: First attempts at stitching large circles with the original motor

It was around this time that I found a chain stitch-based group on Facebook. The "Chainstitch Embroidery Machine Singer 114w103 Cornely and more" group was started in late 2019 and is very active and full of extremely knowledgeable people. Here I met Holly Moore who has ended up being my go-to expert for support and answers as well as becoming a good friend. With her knowledge and guidance, I learned about pulley sizes and their effects on machine speed and eventually figured out the motor issues I was having at this time.

It was clear that I needed to replace my 75mm with something closer to 45mm. Removing the original pulley was a challenge that only segued into more issues. The outer bolt connecting the pulley to the motor had been pressure fitted on and was impossible to remove without power tools. Once finally removed, I found the safety pin between the pulley and motor shaft had been jammed down and could only be removed with the help of a crowbar. Once the pulley was off, I discovered that the shaft had a diameter of 13mm which was either too big or too small for any other pulley on the market to fit. I decided to purchase a pulley with a smaller hole and augment the size of that hole myself. Once I received the new aluminum pulley, I bored out the hole to match the 13mm shaft of the motor and was able to get it onto the shaft with a mallet. The shaft of the motor was too short and the outer bolt no longer fit securely. This pulley was on so tightly however that even a crowbar couldn't get it off so I decided to put the motor back on the machine and try it. I was not confident that after all the work I had done on it the motor would start again, anyways.

It did start. But the belt wouldn't pull the machine's wheel. The groove on the new pulley was too wide for the belt and gave it nothing to grab on to. The motor was also not strong enough to pull the machine anymore with the loss of surface area with the smaller pulley. Tenacious Holly continued to brainstorm. I myself gave up and ordered a new, well reviewed servo motor. With my SewQuiet 6000SM motor installed (which took about five minutes), I was finally ready to go. It was a dream! It was slow enough to control, had variable speed, no needle positioning function, and was practically silent.

I could stitch in straight lines and circles, I could make sharp turns, and I could do detail work. The real practice began and despite the rough start, I picked up the workflow relatively quickly. I had a lot to learn but having the appropriate tools would make it

possible. Regardless of the setbacks, I was very excited to get to it and start to figure out my own method and style of stitching and discover the ins and outs of this art form.

Unknowingly on the eve of more unfortunate news, my timing couldn't have been better. Ready or not I was about to embark on the next phase of my thesis journey.

EAGLE TEARS

Sara Thompson and I had finally been able to reconnect and began to coordinate the embroidery of the jacket pieces. Like last time, her price was very reasonable and I was ready to get the suit done. In order to prep the pieces to be as clear as possible for someone who I would never see and be able to communicate face to face with, I thread marked all the motif placements as well as seam allowances and used some light fusible stabilizer to try and lessen the warping and shrinking of the wool while it was being worked on. I also labeled everything, noting which side of the fabric was the right side, which side of the body the piece would be on, what the piece was, and how many of them there were of each. I packed up the box and sent it out.

A few days later I got the email. Sara had unfortunately been exposed to COVID-19 and had tested positive. With the illness having such a variable severity and my limited time, I had to make a tough decision. Through my independent study, I had grown exponentially more confident in my ability to not only embroider but also to fix any issues that came up with the machine. I also had Holly and the rest of the Facebook group members with whom I was continuing to build a solid relationship. I made the call: I would have to chain stitch the motifs onto the jacket myself.

Figure 49: Thread marking the motif

To begin, I printed out the design on standard printer paper. I could have used some type of tear-away paper but I knew it would take me a while to complete the design and I wanted something more sturdy. I had been using standard printer paper to stitch all of my previous designs and hadn't had any problems with it other than it being a little difficult to remove in tighter spaces. Using a light fusible interfacing, I stabilized the wool in an effort to minimize its warping. I thread marked the outline and tailor tacked the seams open to avoid stitching over them. With the power and set up of the machine, I had discovered that unlike a domestic (or even industrial) straight stitch machine it was very difficult to feel if you had stitched through more than your intended layer. I didn't want to accidentally stitch the seam allowance open in some places and closed in others. I pinned the paper pattern down and decided to start from the bottom and go up that way when the soft wool inevitably stretched it would at least all stretch in the same direction.

What I should have done is gone through and outlined the entire image first which would have secured it down and actually minimized warping and distortion. The method I used ended up warping the wings of the design as the fabric tightened with the stitching making the pattern too big to fit as it was intended in the tighter spaces. Is impossible to tell in the finished motif but it did add some difficulty to the process.

There are many different techniques for the art of chain stitching itself. I've talked in great detail about the machine but that is only half of the process. No matter what style of embroidery the machine is being used for, there are two main elements: lines and solid shapes. Lines are self-explanatory and can either be used to really exhibit the chain stitch by doing a single pass or can be made bold and solid by making several passes over the top. Shapes are filled most commonly by using overlapping circles. This creates a solid, graceful pattern fill. Due to the nature of the stitch, it is very easy to build texture into designs. Figuring out how to pleasingly fill spaces is key to clean, professional looking work. It is the backbone of the art. It is very easy to accidentally create muddy, unclear fill that does not make a professional end product.

Making clean fill takes a lot of thought. The first being the action of the fill itself. You can go over and over the same area and layer stitches but there is a limit. It looks best with several passes but with too many it starts to look bulky and the needle will have a harder time punching through the fabric. Matching up your circles as you fill is the most efficient way to work. Picking where to start is important to establish the pattern direction. The circles move outward and it looks best if there is a general, controlled flow throughout the work. Starting out I had a hard time ending the circular fill. I discovered that ending in a tight circle at the end of the cycle ends up being very visually distracting. The closed shapes within the larger shape break the pattern of fill and draw the eye to them because they look like they are specific details. There are also places on the guitar

motif where the stitches are too tight and seem to coil around each other which adds more unnecessary dimension and texture. Thinking about how you will end, where you are going, and the constant directing to make the circle fill is mentally demanding. Near the end while stitching the eagle wings I started to get a better sense of how to end my fills. Overlapping fill sections look good because it breaks up the defined circle shapes but still flows in the same direction.

Figure 50: Filling texture can be seen clearly on the wings and on the flag

Despite the specificity of filling techniques, artists have been able to inject their style in countless ways and this is what makes a great chain stitcher. I am always amazed looking at the work of others and seeing how they handle problems and create meaningful textures. All of this work is done by turning a hand crank below the table.

Fabric is not controlled by the hands of the artist, in fact your hands shouldn't be near the fabric or on the table at all (Franklin 27). The foot of the machine grabs and moves the material for you in order to ensure each stitch is even and consistent. The hand crank turns three hundred and sixty degrees and it is how you control everything. It's a lot like trying to drive a bumper car or boat that has the circular spinning disc instead of a steering wheel. It took a minute to get the hang of it, but the motion is very satisfying once you get it down. There is also a space of time between your hand movement and the action relay to the front of the machine. It is hard to manage at first, but once you gain the hand-eye coordination, those few seconds become very useful for planning your next movement.

The most fascinating thing to me about these machines is how inseparable the technique of stitching and the actual machine are. It's impossible to talk about one without the other. I have found the key to a happy chain stitch machine, and thus beautiful stitches, is the right tension and finding the right tension is a job-and-a-half on its own. Chain stitch machines are 100% analog. Their design has changed very little since the 1850's and thread tension is controlled in a multitude of ways. Pinpointing the trouble spot is challenging until you learn what to look for. It is a case in which learning how the machine feels and sounds becomes vital to its operation. Because this was one of the first large projects I had done, I had much to learn still.

Halfway through the second guitar motif, the machine started dropping stitches. The chain would randomly stop and pick back up again. At the time I had no idea why this was happening. I called Holly and we spent hours trying to figure it out. It ultimately taught me more about the machine than I could have imagined learning. She showed me how to remove the foot, nipple, needle plate, and needle bar to clean them which needs to be done often to avoid oil and lint build up. Oil and lint combine to create a hard cement

like gunk that is extremely difficult to remove once it sets up. These machines need to be oiled constantly because of all of the metal-on-metal movements and as you can imagine it can create quite the mess inside.

She showed me how to time the system in an easy way without having to mess with the worm gear underneath the table. As with any machine that has a cycle, certain steps and movements need to happen in time in order to produce the expected outcome. The needle must dip down into the plate bed of the machine at a certain time to pick up the thread in order to make the next stitch. There are several ways to set the machine's timing right. When timing with the worm gear, it is possible for the gear to rotate and end in a position that may be correct in the cycle of the machine but is impossible to access again with your screwdriver to tighten it back into place. The easier way is to simply disengage the interior system within the face of the machine, twist the handle to the correct location, and then reconnect the interior system.

Chain stitching is very finicky and needs the exact right amount of tension due to the stitch being created with only one thread. These machines do not have bobbins for an under thread that locks with the first. There are three major ways tension is dealt with. The first one is the physical placement or location of your spool of thread. Because the machine does not have a specific place for it, you have to figure out the best place for it that works for you and the machine. The farther away it is, the higher tension. The less straight the path between the spool and the thread loop, the higher tension. Ultimately every stitcher ends up with several eye hooks screwed into the bottom of their table that they use to create an even path for the thread to follow. My spool, through much trial and tribulation, has ended up by the left leg of my table with an eye screw right above, one directly behind it perpendicular to the looper, and a third right before the looper

essentially making an “L” shape. This allows the thread to pull off the spool evenly and feed smoothly into the machine.

The second method of tension control is the height of the needle. The lower the needle, the less it dips into the looper thus creating tighter stitches. The higher the needle, the more thread it pulls up from underneath and so creates larger, looser loops. This one is tricker. Obviously, you can only drop your needle down so low before you are unable to get the fabric underneath it. This tension also directly influences the look of the stitch. Sometimes you do want large loopy stitches, other times small tight stitches. I have found with subsequent practice that it is best to position the needle how it best serves the project and to adjust tension with the third method: the tension spring. Underneath the table, the thread comes up from its spool, runs its course through the eye hooks and is then directed between two discs that are pushed together with a spring. There is a nut on the end of the bolt that can be tightened or loosened. I’ve found that the simple contraption affords the best variable control with the most straightforward adjustments.

Unfortunately, at the time I hadn’t had the courage to mess with the tension discs. With my machine skipping stitches and Holly at a loss for what was causing it, we tried everything but the tension discs. Then, I noticed something: the hiccups in the stitches were a repeating pattern, the tension tightened and loosened in a predictable way. We unspooled an amount of thread from the cone and let the machine pull it from the ground – zero issues. In fact, it produced a beautiful quality stitch that I hadn’t been able to get from the machine before. Where I had been struggling to understand the exact connection of the parts of the machine, I could now see how the tension played between the three systems. The stitches in the guitar motif were skipping because the tension was both too high and too low. The thread was too loose coming up from under the table, creating the dropped stitches but it was too high on the top so it also kept breaking. It still took many

attempts to learn the feel of the machine and to figure out what it needed but I was finally going in the right direction.

Looking back, the one thing I wish I had had more of were stitching examples. I had Sara's work she had done on the vest and pants but I was still left with a hundred questions, the kind whose answers needed more than just a digital image to find. One thing I struggled with was how tight the stitches should be. You can see it all over the jacket motif as I experimented and learned. Some places were too tight, others too loose. Finding that "just right" was difficult when I didn't know what "just right" was. In the worst situation, while stitching the eagle's chest I accidently stitched a hole right through the fabric because my stitches were far, far too tight. Thankfully I was able to patch it successfully and it is completely hidden.

Figure 51: Accidently stitching a hole in the eagle motif and an invisible repair

I can't say that learning how to chain stitch while working on a Nudie style jacket was the place I would have chosen. But perhaps it was indeed the right place. Even looking at the feathers on the sleeves you can see the vast improvement from the stitching on the back. I really had to learn how to balance the tension and by the end I did understand the relation between stitch lengths and which worked best for what situation. I've developed my ability to fill efficiently and artfully and my general skill with using the machine increased exponentially. I broke the machine in a dozen ways and learned how to fix it in a dozen and a half. And no matter how frustrating it was, I still loved it. There is something to be said about learning how to run a *machine.* It's nothing more than metal with a design that hasn't changed in over one hundred and seventy years. Being able to take it apart, put it back together, and understand every aspect of it has brought me an odd sort of confidence that I was not expecting to find.

Figure 52: The finished jacket motif

Figure 53: Dan Hardick, photo by Logan Smith

COVID-19 and the pandemic's impact on this project was immense. Although Dan is the proud new owner of his very own Thirsty suit, I have not had the opportunity to see him perform while wearing it. Seeing my musician on stage in their suit in the stage lights will have to wait. However, my project's didn't necessarily change so much as how they were achieved did. The plan had always been to design Dan a suit. In the end, I achieved much more than that. My goal was to never embroider the suit myself. Now, I have not one but three chain stitch machines and continue to practice and create even with the suit long done.

Having the chance to design directly for a performer has forever changed my process. So many times as a costume designer I find myself less of a designer and more of the mediator between the director and the costume shop. How often do I have the time

to connect with actors and understand the essence of how they see and what they feel about their characters? The freedom to make decisions only between myself and the performer, Dan in this case, was a fruitful exercise and artistic endeavor. I learned to trust the process. Listening to a client about what they want is different than a director's idea for an actor. Dan wanted a suit for himself and was not facilitating an outfit for someone else which automatically made the situation more personal. We were talking about his body, not someone else's.

I had the chance to really get to know and become friends with Dan Hardick. Working with him was one of the most rewarding aspects of this project. Dan is an insightful collaborator and a true joy to work with. Through my collaboration with him and FingerPistol I also learned far more about the music scene in Austin and the dedication it takes to run a band. While Dan says he gained an appreciation for the work and time that goes into custom tailoring, I gained a better understanding for the work and time that goes into managing a band. To me, that makes a successful collaboration.

Figure 54: Dan Hardick, photo by Logan Smith

Figure 55: Dan Hardick, photo by Logan Smith

Figure 56: Dan Hardick, photo by Logan Smith

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